

# Slog's Dad

## Introduction

**Level:** Upper-Intermediate

**Age:** 14+

'**Slog's Dad**', written by a British writer David Almond (born 15 May 1951), tells the story of a boy, Slog, who one spring morning sees across the square the figure of his father, who died not long ago...

The 'kit' is aimed at developing interest in and motivation for reading, based on creative exploration of the literary text.

Pre-reading activities activate language and cultural knowledge necessary for comprehending the story, as well leading into the genre of magical realism.

While-reading activities are designed to encourage predicting and interpreting, which are crucial for building up motivation for reading.

After-reading activities are focused on the style and themes of the story, which provides a good opportunity for the development of reading skills, as well as prompting imagination and creativity.

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# Key

## Before Reading

### 1. Tell a fantastic story

Tell your students a fantastic story to which, normally, people react by saying “ Really? That’s incredible!” If you don’t have your own story, you can use the sample provided below. Ask your students whether they have ever heard any fantastic stories or even witnessed them. Ask them to share their stories in small groups/pairs.

Sample story: *Once a baby was left at home with its sister, Anna, who was only 5 years old. Their parents went to the supermarket to do some shopping. Anna was playing with the baby when she heard a dog barking outside. She opened the window and looked out. There was a rabbit being taken for a walk by Mr Fletcher, who lived nearby. Oh, the rabbit was so lovely that Anna couldn’t but show it to her little brother. She took him to the window. It was not very difficult. Then she put him on the window-sill and... the baby... fell down from the fifth floor! Guess what? He landed right on the fluffy rabbit ... safe and sound!*

### 2. What associations do you have for the following? Can you guess what they might be?

This activity is aimed at raising students’ cultural awareness. It is also helpful in developing reading skills in the classroom. The activity also requires students to predict the kind of story they are about to start reading. All the items are key elements of the text and addressing them beforehand will be very helpful for students to transcend the boundaries of this or that episode and capture the gist as well as the details.

Your students will be given a list to find out about:

#### **Faith of Our Fathers**

Faith of our Fathers is an English Catholic hymn, written in 1849 by Frederick William Faber in memory of the Catholic martyrs from the time of the establishment of the Church of England by Henry VIII. Faber wrote two versions of the hymn: with seven stanzas for Ireland and with four for England. The Irish version was sung at hurling matches until the 1960s.

#### **Hail Glorious Saint Patrick**

A traditional Christian hymn, based on an ancient Irish melody, with lyrics written by Sister Agnes. The hymn is usually chanted to mark St. Patrick’s Day, on March, 17. St. Patrick is considered to be the patron saint of Ireland, which is why we can assume that the main characters of the story are of Irish origin.

#### **Treasure Island**

Treasure Island is an adventure novel by Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, telling a tale of "pirates and buried treasure".

#### **Woodbines**

Woodbines were a brand of strong unfiltered cigarettes of relatively low cost. The brand was popular in the early 20th century, though a filtered version was launched in the UK in 1948.

### 3. Imagine that you have overheard the following conversations.

The aim of the task is to build up interest in the story by drawing attention to social features of the language they speak. It also prepares the students for meeting slang and dialectic in the text.

Explain to the students that in the UK the language one speaks is an important social indicator, which gives away a lot of information about the speaker: his education, social position, background.

Tell the students that they are going to read two dialogues and get information about the speakers from the language they use.

The students work individually or in pairs and then discuss their ideas in the class.

Some of the words from the dialogues might be difficult for your students to understand. You may need to give them the following hints:

nowt – nothing – Scottish/ Northern English dialect

what's it mean? – what does it mean?

howay – come on – North-Eastern English dialect

alreet – all right

divent – don't

dunno – don't know

Suggested answers:

- a. The characters are probably not rich.
- b. The language the characters use doesn't show that they are well educated.
- c. Various answers are possible.
- d. The characters might be from Scotland or Northern England as there are words from Scottish/ North-Eastern English dialects: nowt, howay  
The words that might have helped: nowt, what's it mean, howay, alreet, divent, dunno.

When the task is done, you may highlight the fact that despite a wide range of varieties and dialects, it is standard English that is taught in schools and it indicates a good education and therefore the respectable social position of the speaker.

**4. Guess the meaning of the underlined words and put them into the categories.**

Ask students to read the statements and categorise the underlined words. Students are supposed to get general understanding from the context and not to translate the words. This activity prepares students for further vocabulary work.

Key

<b>Movements and gestures</b>	<b>Manner of speaking</b>
shield, rest, wave, nod, tug, shrug, stroke	whisper, mutter, yell

**5. Match the words and their meaning.**

Ask students to match the words and their definitions. They may base their guesses on the context in the grouping activity.

Key 1j 2d 3h 4e 5c 6a 7f 8i 9b 10g

**6. Range these words from the least loud to the loudest.**

Ask students to range the words from the quietest to the loudest. You may ask students to demonstrate how to say a phrase in a different manner.

Key ( possible) mutter whisper say cry shout yell

## While Reading

The story is divided into 4 parts. They are not of equal length, as the first three are relatively short, while the last part presents the rest of the text up till the end. Such a division is helpful for capturing students' attention and for encouraging their interest and motivation as soon as they start to read.

It is important to encourage the students to brainstorm their ideas after each small 'chunk' to make them interested and intrigued by the plot of the story, as well as make them want to know what happens next.

The first three parts of the story, which are followed by speculation questions, should be delivered orally to the students (you may want to read it out or to play the recording).

The last and the longest part of the text is read by the students on their own. We suggest playing the recorded story while the students are reading.

### Chunk 1

The first 'chunk' is aimed at introducing the main characters: a boy, named Slog, and the narrator, Slog's friend, called Davie.

Read out or play the following text:

'Spring had come. I'd been running round all day with Slog and we were starving. We were crossing the square to Myers pork shop. Slog stopped dead in his tracks'.

Ask your students: What was there that made Slog stop?

The answers are open to speculation. However, you may expect answer such as that he saw something shocking or frightening, for example, a car crash or an alien.

### Chunk 2

Tell your students that now they are going to find out what made Slog stop in astonishment.

Read the second 'chunk':

"What's up?" I said.

He nodded across the square.

"Look," he said.

"Look at what?"

"It's me dad," he whispered.

"Your dad?"

"Aye."

I just looked at him.

"That bloke there," he said.

"What bloke where?"

"Him on the bench. Him with the cap on. Him with the stick."

I shielded my eyes from the sun with my hand and tried to see. The bloke had his hands resting on the top of the stick. He had his chin resting on his hands. His hair was long and tangled and his clothes were tattered and worn, like he was poor or like he'd been on a long journey. His face was in the shadow of the brim of his cap, but you could see that he was smiling.

Ask your students: What might Slog have been strange about Slog's father that made Slog so surprised?

Ask your students to brainstorm their ideas.

### Chunk 3

Tell your students to listen carefully for the answer and read the third chunk:

"Slogger, man," I said. "Your dad's dead."  
"I know that, Davie. But it's him. He's come back again, like he said he would. In the spring."  
He raised his arm and waved.  
"Dad!" he shouted. "Dad!"  
The bloke waved back.  
"See?" said Slog. "Howay."  
He tugged my arm.  
"No," I whispered. "No!"  
And I yanked myself free and I went into Myers, and Slog ran across the square to his dad.

Ask your students: How did Slog feel? Did Davie feel the same?

From this 'chunk' of the text the students learn that Slog's dad is actually dead. However, the boy takes the man he sees in the square for his dad, who has promised to come back in the spring. Davie, Slog's friend, is sceptical about the situation and he is trying to persuade him not to talk to the man.

After the context of the story has been clarified, hand out the text and let your students read it on their own up to the end. To ensure that the students apprehend the story at the same pace, and both visual and auditory learners feel comfortable, we suggest accompanying the reading process with listening by playing the recorded story.

## After Reading

1. Davie doesn't believe that the man sitting on a bench outside the butcher shop is Slog's father. What does he look like? What kind of person is he? Compare the two men.

Slog knows his father is dead, but he also knows that his father always kept his word. He promised to come back to earth from Heaven to see his son in the spring. When Slog sees a man on a bench outside the butcher's shop, he is convinced it is his father. Davie is convinced the man is a fake.

The aim of the task is to encourage students to think about the possibility that Slog's hope has come true.

They work individually or in pairs looking for information about Mr Mickley and the homeless man on the bench (appearance, personality, manner of speech etc.)

Brainstorm ideas after finishing the task.

Suggested answers:

Joe Mickley	The man ('The bloke')
a binman	the cap
skinny	the stick
a creased face	long and tangled hair
a greasy flat cap	tattered and worn clothes
always puffing on a Woodbine	like he was poor
always singing hymns	like he'd been on a long journey
everybody liked him	smiling
a daft and canny soul	filthy but smooth face
the scent of rotten rubbish that was always on him	shining eyes
smiling	voice got colder
he joked	singing "Faith of Our Fathers"

2. Slog's dad promised him to return in the spring. He said he would follow the smells to the lovely earth. What does the earth smell like? What does it taste like? What does it feel, sound and look like? What does the story say? What do you think?

Slog's father loves his son and loves his wife. He calls the earth "lovely". He says there's no smell in Heaven.

The aim of the task is to encourage students to think what life on earth is 'made of'.

They work individually or in pairs looking for 'feelings' in the story.

#### Suggested answers

It smells like: rotten rubbish, roses, spring, Woodbine,

It tastes like: tea, beer, saveloy with everything

It feels like: summer sun, kiss, true love,

It sounds like: hymns, whispering goodnights, jokes

It looks like: roses, pebbledash walls, red roofs, the empty sky, anybody passing by.

3. Which of the following adjectives, in your opinion, best describe the language of the story? The narrator's language is simple, direct and clear; the sentences are short. Abundance of adjectives usually slows down narration, but there are very few adjectives in this story and those few are used to characterise Slog's father and the bloke.

4. The story is written in English, but some words may puzzle readers because they are either dialect or just ungrammatical. Find and underline all the examples of non-standard English. Think of the standard English equivalents for these phrases.

- 1) It's me dad. – It's my dad.
- 2) Aye – yes
- 3) Him on the bench. – That man on the bench.
- 4) Howay. – Come on
- 5) The doctor said it's nowt. – The doctor said it's nothing.
- 6) You got owt to drink?- Have you got anything to drink?
- 7) I can hardly bliddy walk. – bloody (informal, not polite) – used for giving force to an expression or judgment or used as an almost meaningless addition to angry speech.
- 8) Dunno – I don't know.
- 9) Cos – because
- 10) Saveloy – sort of sausage.
- 11) Gan on – go on – come on
- 12) It's dead canny. – really nice
- 13) Lad – a boy or young man
- 14) Ha! Bliddy ha!- a shout of surprise
- 15)

5. Why do you think the author makes his characters – Slog, his father and the bloke – speak like this?

The use of non-standard, dialectal English may be an indicator of several things: poor education, low social position, strong regional background (or a combination of all three).

6. Describe the community which the characters of the story belong to. Have students look back at the text to find answers to the questions 1-5. Students work in pairs and then discuss the answers as a whole class. They then summarize what they have learned and describe the community the characters belong to.

Option: Ask students about local communities they belong to.

Suggested answers

1 – small

2 – small houses with gardens

3 – people in villages and small towns socialize closely; the houses have got low fences, people simply watch their neighbours' lives

4 – the butcher's name – Billy Myers, the doctor's name – Dr Molly, the priest's name – Father O'Mahoney, the undertaker's name – Mr Blenkinsop

5 – an old woman who enters the butcher's after Davie. No, the citizens don't seem wealthy.

7. Look back at the text of the story and find out the way the characters socialize. Choose the right adjective(s) for each pair and complete the table. Explain your choice.

Individually students highlight the right adjectives for each pair. Discuss as a whole class, make a list of the adjectives for each pair and complete the table.

Option: Ask students about relationships in their local communities.

Suggested answers

a)	Slog and Davie	sympathetic, supportive, understanding, tolerant
b)	Slog and his parents	affectionate, understanding, caring
c)	Mr and Mrs Mickley	sympathetic, supportive, affectionate, caring.
d)	The butcher and his customers	caring, friendly
e)	Slog's Dad and passers-by	friendly, tolerant

8. The plot of the story is built around one peculiar event – Slog's father coming back to his son from Heaven. How do the following characters react to this? Describe their attitudes providing evidence from the text.

Teacher may elicit such understanding from students.

There are four different attitudes to the event: Slog has no doubt the bloke is his father; he trusts him completely. His deep religious feelings, which he shared with his father, would not let him have a shadow of doubt.

Davie can see clearly that the bloke and Slog's father have nothing in common, but he hesitates to express his doubts trying not to spoil his friend's bliss.

Billy the butcher is rather sceptical about life after death, but he spares Slog's feelings.

His comment, which is the last sentence of the story, is very laconic. "That's good," said Billy. And he invites Slog to his shop: "Come and have a dip, son. With everything."

9. Whose belief in the event may be called complete and whose would you describe as sceptical? Do any of the characters change their attitude to the event through the story? Why/Why not? Whose feelings do you think the author sympathizes with?

The bloke is evasive, but he admires Slog's belief: "You are a very rare and special lad." He does not like David's reaction: "He looked at me so cold and at Slog so gentle." When Davie joins Slog and the stranger, he doesn't think the man is Slog's father. He asks the man questions which he answers correctly. He sees the man singing Joe Mickley's favourite hymn and smiling at Slog. He sees Slog happy and sad, and runs with him after the man. He doesn't know where the man disappears to.

Slog, like his parents, has a loving nature. His belief that he sees his real father is so strong and it makes him so happy, that nobody, including the bloke, would dare to crash his illusion, only the speechless pink pig's head shows cynical disbelief.

You may want to focus your students' attention on one more speechless creature – a pink pig's head which appears to be grinning as if it is Death mocking the living.

But when Davie watches Slog talking with the bloke, he looks "out over the pig's head" ignoring the cynical grin.

The answer to the question about the author's sympathy is open.

10. What would you do if you were Davie? The butcher? The Bloke? What would you say to Slog and why?

Open answers

11. Discuss the following questions with a partner.

1) open answers

2) "he was forever singing", "he'd be smiling", "a daft and canny soul". Even after he becomes an invalid he stays calm, friendly and a cheerful person. He doesn't seem depressed, he encourages other people, making them smile. He is satisfied with what he's got.

3) Slog's Dad believes in life after death, in Heaven. His faith helps him.

12. Watching Mr and Mrs Mickley, Davie's mother says "That's love. True love" Why does she think so? (Support your answer with evidence from the text.) What is true love in your opinion? Have you read anything about true love? Name some books/stories.

Students work individually. Make sure they know the verb sacrifice (if not, introduce it to the class).

Guide students' discussion. Explain that love is true if only you sacrifice your time, interests etc, and perhaps even your life, for a person you love. The best example is a mother's love. Mothers always sacrifice themselves for their children. Elicit the names of books/stories your students have read concerning true love. Recommend your own list.

13. You have just read a story 'Slog's Dad'. Choose one of the project tasks or think of your own. This story describes events that could appear both imaginary and realistic. The emotional atmosphere may provoke different feelings. It seems rational to provide an opportunity to let them out. The variety of approaches of the activities are not limited by the task. If the teacher and/or the students wish to add to the list, it would be a good idea. The aim of this task is to look back at the text and to pick out clues, showing the key ideas. Another aim is to develop creativity and allow every student to express themselves.

Let the class split into teams or let some of them work individually.

Offer the students the opportunity to do the creative task.

Set a time limit for the task, which might depend on various aspects such as schedule, the amount of daily homework, etc.

It is important to provide an opportunity to share the results of the work on the projects. One idea is to create a contest for a project grant.

You may want to show the students a few pages from the new novel “Slog’s Dad”, an expanded version of David Almond’s story, illustrated by Dave MacKean, to have a look at the professional illustrator’s work and compare it with their own illustrations.

See sample pages at

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/Slogs-Dad-David-Almond/dp/1406322903#reader\\_1406322903](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Slogs-Dad-David-Almond/dp/1406322903#reader_1406322903)

This is also a good opportunity to inspire them to keep on reading the bigger story.