

If We Were DOGS

Sophie Blackall

TWO-TIME CALDECOTT MEDALLIST



TEACHERS RESOURCES

If We Were DOGS

Sophie Blackall

Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

Introduction	3
Themes & Curriculum Topics	3
Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)	
English Language and Literacy	
Visual Literacy	
Creative Arts	
Further Topics for Discussion and Research	7
Conclusion	7
About the Author/Illustrator	8
Worksheets	9
Bibliography	13
About the Author of the Notes	16

INTRODUCTION

Two-time Caldecott Medallist Sophie Blackall's follow-up to her bestselling *If I Was a Horse* explores the challenges of first friendships and relationships through imaginative play.

*If we were dogs, what kind would we be?
I'd be a big dog! And you'd be a little dog.
Woof!*

Join two friends as they bark and growl, woof and howl – and maybe even quack– in a romp that makes room for everybody's ideas.

Sophie Blackall unleashes an exuberant game of pretend that explores navigating friendship and celebrates boundless imagination.

THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes covered in this book might be related to the Australian Curriculum, including:

HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/>

IMAGINATION AND PLAY

Discussion Point: This book explores the imaginative games that children play. The miniature playhouse, objects and craft materials on the cover and opening frames suggest that the home is their playground. (Later we see the actual house they live in, which is identical to the miniature house.) When we first see the big dog, they are kicking off a polka dot sock which was worn by the person under the table in the opening frame. This symbolically represents the child's imagination coming into play, as well as their need to assert their independence. Invite students to discuss what the opening two double-page spreads in the book mean to them.

Discussion Point: Children love to imagine themselves either as someone or something else (a dog or a duck!), or in a completely different situation. Discuss imagination, as well as the things or situations your students have imagined for themselves. What animal would they most like to be?

Discussion Point: Imagining or dreaming is a way of escaping reality. It can also assist in resolving frustrations or confusion when facing perceived restrictions either at home or at school. In frustration, the little dog makes this poignant statement: 'Sometimes I HAVE IDEAS TOO!' (p 25) Discuss how children often feel overlooked or underestimated by older peers, siblings, parents or teachers.

NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS

Discussion Point: The big dog obviously enjoys being a leader and is confident and bossy. The little dog looks worried in each frame. But finally, the little dog reveals that they didn't want to be a dog. They wanted to be a duck. The story resolves happily as the big dog realises that playing with a duck is just as much, if not more, fun than playing with a little dog! In this book, the little dog explains their feelings and the big dog looks chastened, then falls asleep with the duck on his head, saying: 'Good dog.' (p 32) Who is the leader now?

Discussion Point: This is reminiscent of the classic work *I Wish I Had a Pirate Suit* by Pamela Allen (1991), in which two brothers act out their roles, with the smaller brother eventually taking a more active role and usurping the older brother's power. Relationships between friends and family members are often invested with power play of some sort. Compare this book to other texts about relationships with family and friends.

DOGS

Discussion Point: Dogs are much loved family pets in many households, and this book celebrates that fact. The narrator in the first spread describes their favourite type of dog: 'I love dogs. I love fluffy ones and spotted ones and ones with stumpy tails.' Invite students to discuss their dogs, or the dogs owned by people they know, and what they love about them.

Discussion Point: Discuss the many interesting words which relate to dog breeds. For example, the little dog lists several breeds (p 26), and others include: Affenpinscher, Bouvier des Flandres, Eurasier, Keeshond, Saluki, etc. Read about various dog breeds.

Discussion Point: Dogs are said to be 'human's best friend'. Why?

Discussion Point: Read, research and discuss your findings about dogs after reading several non-fiction texts. [See **Bibliography**.]

FAMILIES AND HOMES

Discussion Point: The home in this book is surrounded by a picket fence, beyond which is a park containing a duck pond, old-fashioned playground equipment including a seesaw, swing and sandpit, and a pack of dogs. Sophie Blackall's landscapes are often 'retro' in aspects, with bucolic or vintage details. In this book, the checkered tablecloth, dotted tableware, two vintage chairs painted in bright green and blue, and the framed silhouette on the wall are reminiscent of the folk art which often features in Blackall's work, since she relishes the traditions (and history) such art conveys. What sort of home or family is suggested by the images contained in this book?

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects of its written narrative:

Discussion Point: This text is written as a series of statements in first person plural, beginning with, 'If we were dogs...' But who is the narrator? And who is the narrator addressing?

Discussion Point: Rhythm and rhyme are employed in this text. For example: 'We'd run and leap! We'd wrestle and roll! We'd bark and growl and woof and howl!' Encourage students to use these devices when writing their story below.

Activity: Invite students to write a short text beginning with the words: 'If we were [?]'. The word they insert will then lead on to the completion of several sentences to make a story.

Activity: Test your students' **comprehension** by asking them questions about the written and visual text. For example, how many ducks are swimming in the pond?

VISUAL LITERACY

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>

Using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, the visual text of a picture book combines with the written text to tell the story, as explored below:

Discussion Point: The **packaging** of the book is made by both a **jacket** (the paper outer-cover) and a **case**. The front of the **jacket** depicts two dogs sitting at a table wearing party hats and looking directly at the reader. One dog is large and the other small. The large dog looks confident and imposing; the small dog looks timid. The large dog has knocked over his cup on the table. On the **back of the jacket**, a miniature playhouse with miniature objects and figures scattered about it on a rug are depicted, suggestive of child's play. On the wall of this room is a framed portrait of two dog silhouettes – one large and one small. The **case** depicts many different breeds of dog. Invite students to identify any of the breeds on the cover. The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. Discuss the information gleaned from these two cover illustrations for this book. [See **Creative Arts** below.]

Activity: The **front endpapers** contain silhouettes of various breeds of dog. The **back endpapers** 'mix it up', as there are several animals depicted there and only one dog. Invite students to identify any of the dog breeds on the front endpapers, and any of the animals on the back endpapers, and then to experiment in drawing their own animal silhouettes. [See also **Worksheet 2**.]

Discussion Point: Before the title page, there is a double-page spread or half-title spread, where the story begins. It depicts the same table, but this time with two people underneath the table, one of them addressing the other, asking: If they were a dog, what sort might they be? This is followed by publication details (p 3) and the **title page** (p 4), which depicts a large dog racing off the page so that only the hindquarters are visible. What information or messages do this half-title and title page convey?

Discussion Point: Sophie Blackall's work always contains carefully detailed **patterns**. For example: the checkered tablecloth on the cover and inside the book; the patterns on the tableware on the table; the fine lines of the fur on both the big dog and the little dog; the dog prints leading from the house to the park; the trees in the garden of their house, which are each finely etched drawings; the many patterns of fur on each of the pack of dogs they play with at the park. What other patterns did you find in the visual text?

Discussion Point: There is a great deal of **subtext** in the images. For example, the two dogs seem to be celebrating as they are wearing party hats and have balloons. What are they celebrating? And are they siblings? Or friends? The two people under the table at the beginning are never seen in this book, so it is deliberately ambiguous. In the spread of pp 15–16, note that the little dog is not following the big dog but has halted in the sandpit and turned away to look at the ducks in the pond, hinting at the resolution of the story. What other subtext did you notice in this visual text?

Activity: What can you surmise about the two characters in this book by observing their **facial expressions** and '**body language**'? Study each image for insight into how Sophie Blackall's characters are conveyed visually.

Activity: Medium is integral to how picture books are created. On a panel facing the title page, there is a note to readers: 'The illustrations in this book were made using digital pencils and gouache brushes in Procreate superimposed over scanned vintage papers . . . The text was set in Plantin MT Pro, and the display type was handlettered.' Discuss with students the medium used and then invite them to draw a dog as a visual response to this picture book text. [See **Bibliography**.] [See also **Worksheet 1**.]

Activity: The **colours** used in this book are rich, warm, pastel tones. Ask students to colour their drawing of a dog, employing colour in this way.

Discussion Point: Slapstick humour is another element of this text. For example, the little dog jumps into the bowl of water while the big dog drinks from the other bowl; the big dog, in digging a hole, sprays all the dirt onto the little dog; the big dog, doing his tricks, collapses on the squashed beach ball. What other scenes did your students find humorous?

Discussion Point: Perspective is used to impart meaning as well. For example, the aerial views of the park and the pack of dogs (pp 15–16, pp 17–18, pp 19–20). The format varies too, with some frames appearing in a series of comic-like images depicting the two very different dogs conversing (pp 13–14 and pp 25–26). Invite students to discuss the varied visual perspective and format employed in these images.

Activity: Invite students to draw, paint or collage a scene to accompany the story they wrote above. Create a classroom mural using all the images. [See also **Worksheet 1** below.]

Activity: Read other picture book texts about imagination and play, dogs or navigating relationships and discuss the ideas they convey. [See **Bibliography**.]

CREATIVE ARTS

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

1. Create a diorama of the dogs sitting at the table inside the home, a scene which is depicted in this story. Then create another scene in which the dogs might appear. See: 'How to Make a Diorama' *WikiHow* <https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Diorama>

2. The crafts depicted on the first double-page spread could inspire students to create their own model of the scene. The house is a discarded box; the fence, swing and seesaw are constructed from paddle pop sticks; the tree trunk is a toilet roll; the sandpit is the lid of a rectangular box; the duck pond is a plastic lid; and glue, scissors and tape are scattered around the models.

3. Make a paper plate dog face. Cut out two ears from coloured craft paper and glue or staple them to the plate. Draw a typical dog mouth and nose onto the plate using Texta pens. Then either glue plastic eyes to the plate or draw them yourself. Use coloured pencils to shade the plate depending on the type of dog you are imagining.

4. Create a paper plate duck pond like the one in this book. See Instructions here: '21 Duck Crafts for Kids to Spread Their Wings' *Craftsy Hacks* <https://craftsyhacks.com/duck-crafts/>

5. Students could perform '**Five Little Ducks**', a popular nursery rhyme, using paddle pop sticks glued to images of ducks as props. [See images for **Worksheet 3**]. Cut them out, glue them onto craft paper and then to the sticks. [This idea derives from the website listed above.]

6. Create a poster or a book trailer to promote this book. [See **Bibliography**.]

FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

- Research the work of Sophie Blackall. Compare this book to her other books.
- Students might research this book in comparison to reading other picture books, such as those listed in the **Bibliography**.
- Investigate any other topic which you consider is suggested by this text.

CONCLUSION

Sophie Blackall celebrates children's imaginations in *If We Were Dogs*, as she did in her previous book, *If I Was a Horse* (2023). She also celebrates the child's navigation of power in relationships. And also the love of dogs! This is all viewed via the prism of her whimsical storytelling and exquisitely suggestive and often ambiguous art.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR/ ILLUSTRATOR

Sophie Blackall is the bestselling and two-time Caldecott Medal-winning artist behind *Finding Winnie*, *Hello Lighthouse*, *Farmhouse* and *If I Was a Horse*. Sophie has illustrated more than fifty books, and her work has been shortlisted for the CBCA Picture Book of the Year and the ABIA Children's Picture Book of the Year. *If I Was a Horse* was also the winner of the BookPeople Children's Book of the Year Award. Sophie was born and raised in Australia, and now lives in Brooklyn with her family. In 2022, Sophie was appointed as a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her significant service to children's literature. See: <https://www.sophieblackall.com/>

See also:

Blackall, Sophie 'Closing Keynote: Notes to Self' SCBWI New York Conference, February 2, 2025' *SCBWI Blog*
<https://scbwiconference.blogspot.com/2025/02/keynote-sophie-blackall.html>

Blackall, Sophie 'Sophie Blackall presents 'If I Was a Horse' *YouTube*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oKJkf2UIVE>

Blackall, Sophie '2016 Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 27, 2016
<https://www.hbook.com/story/2016-caldecott-medal-acceptance-by-sophie-blackall>

Blackall, Sophie '2019 Caldecott Medal Acceptance by Sophie Blackall' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 26, 2019
<https://www.hbook.com/story/2019-caldecott-medal-acceptance-by-sophie-blackall>

O'Sullivan, Joanne 'Caldecott Medalist Opens Retreat for Authors and Artists in the Catskills' *Publishers Weekly* March 15, 2022
<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/88771-caldecott-medalist-opens-retreat-for-authors-and-artists-in-the-catskills.html>

Rich, Susan 'The Audacious Choice of Sophie Blackall: Profile of 2016 Caldecott Medal Winner Sophie Blackall' *The Horn Book Magazine* June 30, 2016
<https://www.hbook.com/story/the-audacious-choice-of-sophie-blackall-profile-of-2016-caldecott-medal-winner-sophie-blackall>

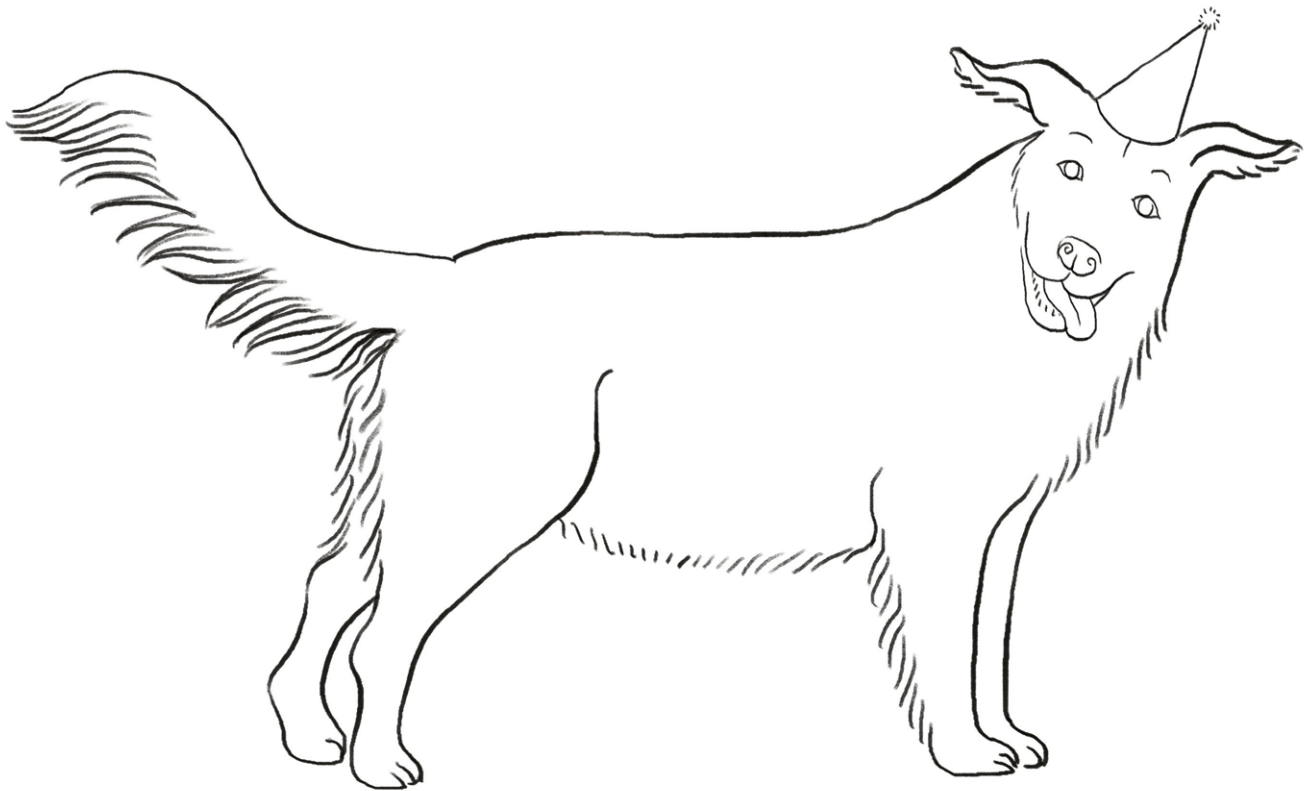
Saxon, Antonia 'Q&A with Sophie Blackall' *Publishers Weekly* September 8, 2022
<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-authors/article/90266-q-a-with-sophie-blackall.html>

Sheahan-Bright, Robyn 'Sophie Blackall: A Profile' *Magpies* Vol 38, Issue 2, May 2023, pp 20–22.

WORKSHEETS

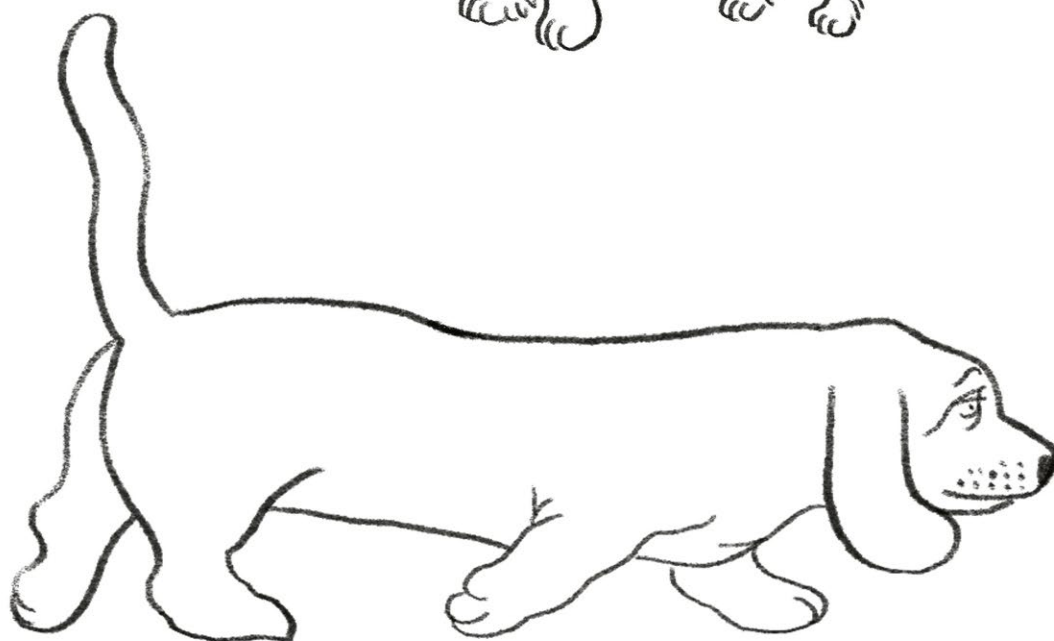
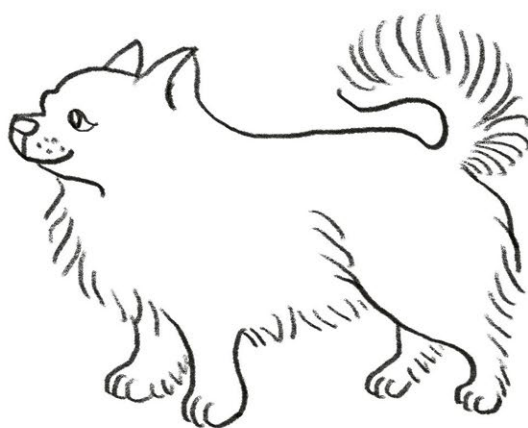
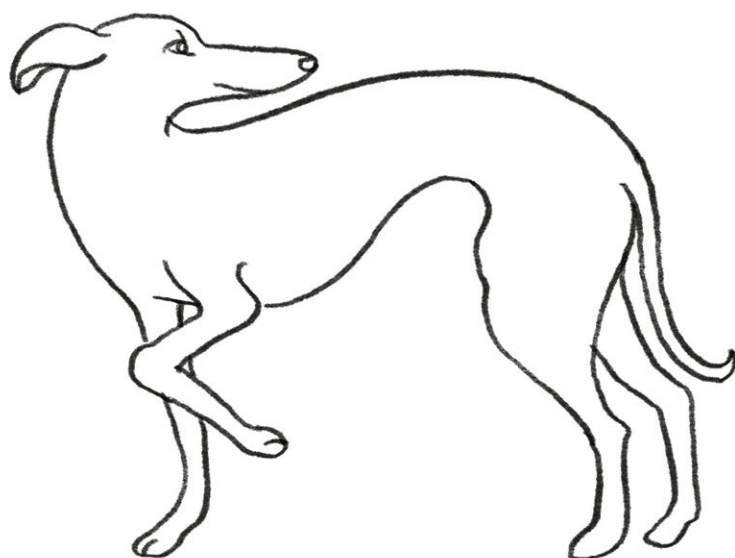
WORKSHEET 1. DRAW AND COLLAGE THIS DOG

Draw a background for the image below and then paint or decorate the scene you have drawn. You could also use collaged materials to decorate the image and then add a caption or sentence to describe it.

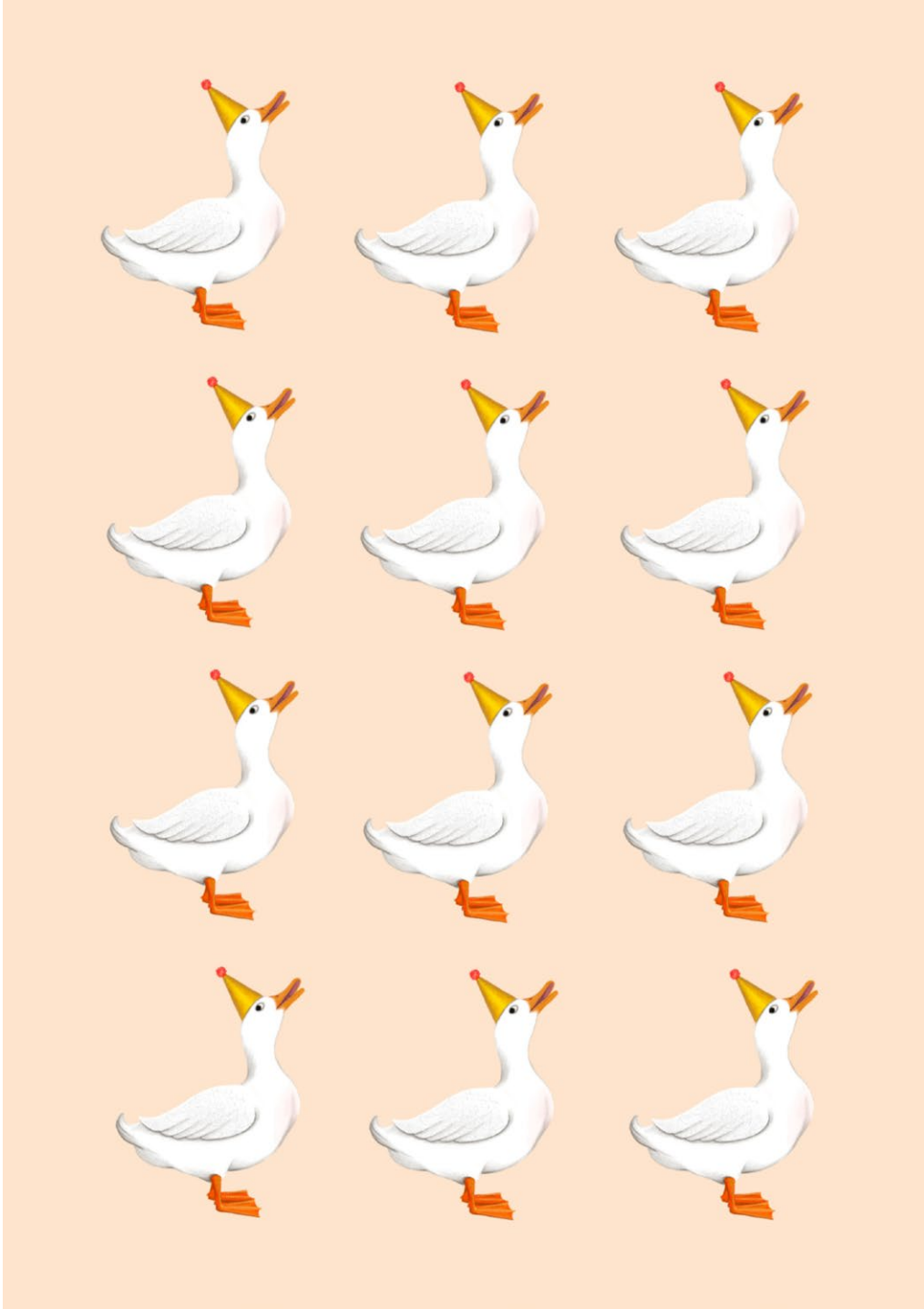


WORKSHEET 2. SILHOUETTE TEMPLATE

The silhouettes below can be coloured in black Texta and then framed, like the image in the book (p 1). You could cut them out and glue them to a coloured background to achieve a more striking effect.



WORKSHEET 3. DUCK QUIZ



Questions:

1. How many ducks can you see?
2. If you multiplied them by two, how many would you have?
3. If you took one row away, how many would you have?
4. If you took one column away, how many would you have?
5. If you divided these ducks by three, how many would you have?

Answers: 1. Twelve. 2. Twenty-four. 3. Nine. 4. Eight. 5. Four.

WORKSHEET 4. WALLPAPER

In many of Sophie Blackall's books, the wallpaper is often patterned. Print the wallpaper below in colour. Then cut it out and use it in the diorama you have created under **Creative Arts**. (You may need to print it twice, depending on the size or number of walls you wish to decorate.)



BIBLIOGRAPHY

PICTURE BOOKS

NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS:

Allen, Pamela *I Wish I had a Pirate Suit* Penguin Puffin, 1991.

Blabey, Aaron *The Brothers Quibble* Penguin Australia, 2015.

Child, Lauren *The New Small Person* Candlewick, 2015.

Godwin, Jane *I'll Always Be Older Than You Ill. by Sara Acton* Little Hare, 2020.

Laguna, Sofie *When You're Older Ill. by Judy Watson.* Murdoch Books, 2022.

Parker, Danny *Molly and Mae Ill. by Freya Blackwood.* Little Hare Books, 2017.

Paul, Miranda *Mia Moves Out Ill. by Paige Keiser.* RHUS Children's books, 2019.

Choi, Seo-Yun *Let's Be Friends Ill. by Masumi Furukawa.* Big & Small, 2015.

See also:

'Warm-Hearted Picture Books About Siblings' *Imagination Soup*

<https://imaginationsoup.net/picture-books-siblings/>

DOGS:

Applegate, Katherine and Choldenko, Gennifer *Dogtown* (Dogtown Book 1) Ill. by Wallace West. Feiwel & Friends, 2023

Applegate, Katherine and Choldenko, Gennifer *Mouse and His Dog* (Dogtown Book 2) Ill. by Wallace West. Feiwel & Friends, 2024.

Bedford, David *The Way I Love You Ill. by Ann James.* Little Hare Books, 2004.

Bell, Johanna *Cheeky Dogs Ill. by Dion Beasley.* Allen & Unwin, 2016.

Bell, Johanna *Digger Digs Down Ill. by Huni Melissa Bolliger.* UQP, 2024.

Bently, Peter *I Am Dog Ill. by Chris Chatterton.* Macmillan, 2021.

Blabey, Aaron *Pig the Pug* Scholastic, 2014.

Blunt, Fred *All You Need To Know About Dogs* by A.Cat. Quarto UK, 2024.

Cotler, Joanna *If I Were a Dog* penguin Group USA, 2021.

Cummings, Troy *Can I Be Your Dog?* RHUS Children's Books, 2022.

Dodd, Linley *Hairy Mclary and Friends* series (20 books) Penguin.

Dyson, Nikki *Flip Flap Dogs* Nosy Crow, 2017.

Elliott, Mick *Dads and Dogs* Walker Books, 2023.

Falconer, Ian *Two Dogs* HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

Fenton, Corinne *Little Dog and the Summer Holiday* Ill. by Robyn Cowcher. Black Dog Books, 2019.

Finn, Moira *Too Many Dogs* Ill. by Lucinda Gifford. Affirm Press, 2025.

Graham, Bob *Let's get a Pup!* Walker Books, 2001.

Graham, Bob *The Trouble With Dogs* Walker Books, 2007.

Harry, Pip *The Inside Dog* Ill. by Carolyn Davis. Hachette, 2025.

Jinks, Catherine *Barney* Ill. by Stephen Michael King. Scholastic Press, 2018.

King, Stephen Michael *Three* Scholastic Press, 2019.

Lester, Alison *My Dog Bigsy* Viking, 2015.

McKimmie, Chris *The New Dog* Ford Street Publishing, 2022

McKimmie, Chris *Me, Teddy* Allen & Unwin, 2016.

Rayner, Catherine *Otto the Top Dog* Pan Macmillan, 2024.

Rubinstein, Gillian *Dog In, Cat Out* Ill. by Ann James. Omnibus Books, 1991.

Saxby, Claire *Seadog* Ill. by Tom Jellett. Children's Original, 2014.

Shanahan, Lisa *The Postman's Dog* Ill. by Wayne Harris. Allen & Unwin, 2005.

Whaite, Michael *100 Dogs* Penguin UK, 2018.

Zion, Gene *Harry The Dirty Dog* HarperCollins, 2006, 2002, 1956.

See also:

'Best Picture Books About Dogs' *Good Reads*

https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/10552.Best_Picture_Books_About_Dogs

IMAGINATION AND PLAY:

Bancroft, Jack Manning *Imag-Ination* Ill. by Bronwyn Bancroft. Little Hare, 2024.

Berger, Samantha *What If?* Ill. by Michael Curato. Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2018.

Gleeson, Libby *Clancy & Millie and the Very Fine House* Ill. by Freya Blackwood. Little Hare Books, 2010.

Lester, Alison *Imagine* Allen & Unwin, 2005, 1989.

O' Byrne, Nicola *Use Your Imagination* Nosy Crow, 2015.

Perry, Sarah *If...* Getty Publications, 2020, 1995.

Shurety, Wenda *Eva's Imagination* Ill. by Karen Erasmus. New Frontier, 2019.

Veissid, Jacqueline *Ruby's Sword* Ill. by Paola Zakimi. Chronicle Books, 2019.

See also:

'The Best Picture Books that Celebrate the Imagination' *Dad Suggests*

<https://www.dadsuggests.com/home/picture-books-that-celebrate-the-imagination>

'Picture Books About Imagination' *Reading Middle Grade*

<https://readingmiddlegrade.com/picture-books-about-imagination/>

JUNIOR NON-FICTION

Chin, Lili *Dogs of the World: A Gallery of Pups from Purebreds to Mutts* [A Dog Breed Book] Ten Speed Press, 2025.

Evans, Frances *Lonely Planet Atlas of Dogs* Ill. by Kelsey Heaton. Lonely Planet Kids, 2022.

Everything Dogs: Canine Facts, Photos and Fun to Get Your Paws On! National Geographic Kids, 2023.

Fisher, Diana *How to Draw Dogs & Puppies Step-by-Step Instructions For 20 Different Breeds* Quarto US, 2019.

Hall, Graeme *The Ultimate Kids' Guide to Dogs: Everything you need to know to be a dog's best friend* Ill. by Alice Tait. Puffin, 2024.

My Book of Dogs and Puppies: A Fact-Filled Guide to Your Canine Friends Dorling Kindersley, 2023.

Pocket Eyewitness Dogs: Facts at Your Fingertips Dorling Kindersley, 2018.

Sorosiak, Carlie *World of Dogs: A Celebration of Fascinating Facts and Amazing Real-Life Stories for Dog Lovers* Nosy Crow, 2023.

Swinney, Nicola Jane *101 Dogs An Illustrated Compendium of Canines* Ill. by Romy Blümel. Bonnier, 2022.

WEBSITES – TEACHING RESOURCES

'Browse Breeds' *Dogs Australia*

<https://dogsaustralia.org.au/BrowseBreed/browse-a-breed/>

'21 Duck Crafts for Kids to Spread Their Wings' *Craftsy Hacks*

<https://craftsyhacks.com/duck-crafts/>

'How to Make a Diorama' *WikiHow*

<https://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Diorama>

'How To Make a Book Trailer' *Tristan Bancks*

<https://www.tristanbancks.com/2015/05/how-to-make-book-trailer.html>

'10 Awesome Dog Facts' *National Geographic Kids*

<https://www.natgeokids.com/uk/discover/animals/general-animals/dog-facts/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. In 2011, she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland; in 2012, the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Australia; and in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021, she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

