

DROPPING IN

GEOFF HAVEL

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Themes: friendship, tolerance, skateboarding, cerebral palsy, ADHD

Year level: Y5–9



ABOUT THE BOOK

Ian loves computer games and skateboarding with his best friend, Ranga. But while Ranga is a daredevil, getting amazing air and landing awesome tricks, Ian is more cautious. All of the boys' attention is directed towards an upcoming skate competition ... until a new kid named James moves in across the street. James has cerebral palsy, and relies on his electric wheelchair to come to the skate park and cheer them on. But Ian *knows* that James desperately wants to skate too! As the three become close friends, Ranga reckons he has an idea that could make his dream come true ...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geoff Havel was born in the mountains of New Guinea. As a baby, he liked to sit in a sandpit on the edge of the jungle, stuffing whole bananas down his throat. His manners have improved since then, that is, unless he spots a good idea for a story. Right in the middle of whatever he's doing, he gets a faraway look in his eyes, rips out his trusty notebook and slams the idea between the pages. Geoff was the recipient of the West Australian Younger Readers' Book Award (2005) and was also shortlisted for the Western Australian Premier's Book Award (2002) and the West Australian Young Readers' Book Award (2002).



STUDY NOTES

LITERACY: COMPREHENDING TEXTS THROUGH LISTENING, READING AND VIEWING

Predicting

1. What first impressions do you get from the cover of *Dropping In*?
 - a. What do you expect the novel to be about?
 - b. Why do you think the publisher chose to package the book this way?
2. Read the blurb together as a class. Does this make you want to read the book? Why/why not?

Suggested reading plan

Alternate between:

- Reading chapters together as a class (allocating one page or one paragraph per student)
- Asking students to read to one another in pairs or small groups
- Assigning independent reading for homework or silent reading during class

Comprehension strategies to practise Y5–9

- Slowing reading rate for comprehension
- Self-monitoring for understanding
- Identifying key ideas/themes
- Summarising
- Inferring

- Drawing conclusions

Comprehension questions to explore while reading

- Compare and contrast the characterisation of the narrator (Ian) and his best friend (Ranga) in the opening chapters. List three adjectives you would use to describe each boy's personality. Support your claims with at least two quotes from the text.
 - In what ways do Ian and Ranga seem similar/different?
 - Why do you think they are best friends? What makes their friendship work so well?
 - Have you ever had a good friend who was very different from you?
- Mum walks in. A frown darkens her face when she sees Ranga. He has that effect on adults.* (p. 9)
 - Why do you think Ranga has this effect on adults?
 - Why do you think Ranga prefers his nickname to his real name, Warren?
 - Is the nickname 'Ranga' ordinarily used in an unkind manner? Why do you think this is not the case for Warren?
- Ranga just said what I thought when I saw the kid, but I didn't say it. Not out loud anyway. [...] 'Don't say that. You don't know what's up with him.'* (pp. 13–14)
Why is the term 'retard' offensive to people with disabilities? What negative and derogatory connotations are associated with this word?
- Reread page 15. How is the character James introduced in the early chapters? Use three adjectives to describe his personality.
- ... he grabs at the joystick on his wheelchair. He's having a lot more trouble getting hold of it than he was just a second ago. [...] He goes red as he tries to force his hand to grab the joystick, but it won't obey him.* (p. 16)
 - How do you think you would feel if you were James in this situation? Frustrated? Angry? Embarrassed? Sad? Why would you feel this way?
 - On page 15 James confidently controls his chair as he enters the classroom *without crashing into anything*. In contrast, on page 16 *his wheel scrapes the frame* as he exits the door. Why do you think that is? Can you think of a time when your own thoughts and emotions affected your abilities?
- Fear comes creeping into Ranga's eyes. It's in the way his head sinks into his shoulders. It's in the bunching of his mouth. He knows he's gone too far this time but I bet he doesn't know why, even now.* (p. 17)
 - How is the characterisation of Ranga different here to the fearless boy from the beginning?
 - Why do you think Ranga doesn't know what he has done wrong?
- The school principal tells the class, *'James' body just won't obey his brain properly.'* (p. 18) What do you imagine this would be like? Turn to a partner and discuss.
- He drives over to the middle and turns his chair so he's facing the class. He's been crying. His eyes are red and puffy. All I can think of is how brave he is.* (p. 18)
 - Create a class definition for the term 'bravery'.
 - What does 'bravery' mean to you?
 - In what ways do you think James is brave?
- Reread the first paragraph on page 20.
 - Why do you think Ranga doesn't want Ian to come over? Do you think his mum is really sick?
 - Create a class definition of the term 'foreshadowing'.
 - What complications might be foreshadowed here regarding Ranga's mother?
- I'm almost at the front door when I hear his mum shouting. She's yelling that Ranga's a nuisance and that he makes her life miserable. There's some scuffling and a crash and suddenly the front door is ripped open. It's Ranga's mum. She steps outside even though she's in a dressing-gown.* (p. 21)
 - Create a definition for the term 'inference'. What does it mean to 'infer' the meaning of a text?
 - What things might you infer about Ranga's home life in this excerpt?
- Reread page 23. Why do you think Ian's parents display this attitude?
- Ranga walks down the driveway and straightaway I know something's not right. He never walks anywhere, he runs. He's got one arm tucked up against his side as though it's sore. His bag is on his other shoulder but he's leaning over as though it's really heavy, though it can't be – not the way it's bouncing.* (p. 24)
 - What might Ranga's posture symbolise here? (i.e. a heavy weight? A worry he is carrying?)
 - What do you think has happened to him?
- Do you think Ranga's black eye was an accident? (p. 25) Why/why not? Turn to a partner and discuss.
- Now I'm not sure exactly what he wants to be kept a secret.* (p. 28)
 - What do you think Ranga wants to be kept a secret?

- b. Do you think Ian should keep this a secret? Or should he talk to his parents or the principal?
- c. What would you do if you were in Ian's situation?
17. *People always try to take over, like I can't do anything at all. They think they're helping but they're not.* (p. 32)
Why do you think it is so important to James to be independent?
18. James declares that *'You've got to take a risk to learn a new thing.'* (p. 36)
- a. Do you agree with him? Why/why not?
- b. Turn to a partner and share a time when you have taken a risk to learn something new. What happened? How did you feel? Were you glad that you tried something new?
19. *'Hi Ranga,' James says. He smiles. Then Ranga is smiling too and, just like that, we're all mates.* (p. 37).
- a. Why do you think James forgives Ranga so quickly?
- b. Would you have forgiven him so easily? Why/why not?
20. *When Ranga does an ollie James does this little lurch upwards in his chair. He's feeling every move in his mind but his body just isn't going to cooperate ... he wants to skate a lot more than I do. It's unfair that he can't.* (p. 37)
- a. Create a class definition of the term 'unfair'.
- b. What other things do you think are 'unfair' for James?
21. *'Don't do it, Ranga,' I say. I'm almost pleading and I hate myself for it 'cause it sounds like I'm scared, but I know what's about to happen. I've seen it before.* (p. 41)
- a. What do you think fuels Ranga's need to be reckless?
- b. *You'd think he'd learn, but he doesn't.* (p. 42) Why do you think Ranga doesn't learn from his mistakes?
22. *They think his mum is bashing him! That's stupid! Or is it?* (p. 47)
- a. What do you think? Turn to a partner and share your opinion.
- b. What would you do if you thought a friend of yours was a victim of domestic violence?
- c. Who could you reach out to for advice and help?
23. *Ranga might not know what I said in here, but I will. I don't feel like a good friend. I feel dirty. Even if his mum does hit him, I feel dirty.* (p. 48)
- a. Why do you think Ian feels dirty?
- b. Do you think he should voice his concerns to an adult?
24. Why do you think James believes he will never have a girlfriend? (p. 55) Do you think he will? Why/why not?
25. Why do you think Ian is given the nickname 'Sticks'? (p. 56) What connotations might be associated with this nickname?
26. *'Everything is too hard,' James says. 'If I didn't just try stuff anyway, I'd never do anything.'* (p. 62)
Turn to a partner and share a memory of a time when you tried at something that was extremely difficult. How did you feel? Did you succeed? What did you learn from the experience?
27. *Ranga puts on a show that day. He's upside down in the air half the time, spinning like a top as well.* (p. 71)
Research famous skateboarding tricks. Create a list of their names and descriptions. Create a sketch of each position. Present your findings as a poster or a booklet.
28. James jokes that he wants his legs cut off because they *just cause pain and get in the way* (p. 74). Why do you think Ian is so horrified by this joke?
- a. Do you think James means it? Why/why not?
- b. Were you horrified too?
29. Luke relentlessly bullies Ian (p. 79). Why do you think people bully others?
- a. How would you feel if you were being bullied? Scared? Anxious? Sad?
- b. What should you do if you or someone you know is being bullied?
- c. Who can you reach out to for help and advice?
30. Why do you think Ian, Ranga and Ian's mum let James win the Dip and Gunk game? (p. 90) Why might it be important for James to feel like he can rival his friends at this game?
31. *'Some people will do anything to get out of school.'* (p. 93)
- a. What is the role of humour in Ian's and Ranga's friendship with James?
- b. How does it help all three boys to cope with difficult situations?
32. *How do you tell a friend that he is about the bravest person you know* (p. 93).
- a. Why is James the bravest person Ian knows?
- b. Who is the bravest person you know? In what ways are they brave?
33. *What if a car appears now?* (p. 124) Do you think putting wheels on the couch is a reckless and silly idea? Why/why not? Would you ride it?
34. *I still think it's risky but Jess says that the whole point was to let James feel what skateboarding is like.*

- She says skateboarding is a bit risky – that’s what makes it so good.* (p. 126) Do you agree with Jess? Or do you think it’s too risky?
35. *‘No,’ says a voice next to me. ‘Don’t move him. He might have spinal injuries.’ It’s the car driver.* (p. 127) How would you feel if you were Ian in this moment? Guilty? Terrified? Worried for James? Turn to a partner and discuss.
36. *Ranga is still making this keening noise, hugging his knees and rocking back and forth, his eyes fixed on James.* (p. 128)
- Ranga is ordinarily fearless. Why do you think he reacts this way to the accident?
 - Compare and contrast the ways in which Ian and Ranga react to the crash. What does this reveal about their character?
37. *What? That’s not fair! It’s not like we planned to do anything bad. It just turned out that way.* (p. 131) Do you think Ian and Ranga should be grounded for building the couch? Why/why not?
38. *‘That was the best fun I’ve had in years. Thanks guys.’* (p. 134) Given James’ statement, do you think Ian and Ranga should have taken James on the couch? Why/why not?
39. *... over Jess’ shoulder I see James looking at us. There is the saddest look on his face. It’s only there for a moment. He blinks it away, smiles and gives me his version of a thumbs-up sign.* (p. 141) What do you think James is sad about in this moment? What gives you a clue?
40. *‘Cool move,’ he says.* (p. 142).
- Do you think this ending indicates that Luke will stop bullying Ian now? Why/why not?
 - Create a class definition of the term ‘tone’.
 - Do you think Luke’s phrase, ‘cool move’, has a sarcastic or a sincere tone? Why? What clues does the author provide?
41. How is the theme of friendship portrayed throughout *Dropping In*?

LITERACY: COMPOSING TEXTS THROUGH SPEAKING, WRITING AND CREATING

After reading: written comprehension

Comprehension questions can be adapted from the discussion points above – have students write paragraph answers supporting their claims with quotes from the text.

Spelling and vocabulary: word observations

42. As children encounter a variety of new words throughout their reading of *Dropping In*, have them complete a word observation sheet with the following prompts. This will later help them to memorise the correct spelling of new vocabulary to use in their own writing, such as: *entertainment, suspended, concentrating, absolutely, tomorrow, suggestion, motorised, wheelchair, cerebral palsy, intellectually*
- How many letters are in the word?
 - How many syllables?
 - Does the word contain any silent letters or double letters?
 - Is it plural or singular?
 - Does it contain any letter patterns?
 - How many vowels and consonants are there in the word?
 - Does it have a prefix or a suffix?
 - Does it have a base or root word?
43. Have students create a booklet containing the word observations they collect as they read *Dropping In* for future reference.

Synonyms vs. antonyms

44. Create a definition for the term ‘synonym’. Explain that synonyms can be a useful resource when attempting to make your writing more varied, interesting and precise, as opposed to constructing repetitive or dull sentences.
45. What are some synonyms for the following words used in *Dropping In*?
- worried* (e.g. concerned)
 - shouting* (e.g. yelling)
 - I say* (e.g. I ask)
 - happy* (e.g. delighted)
46. Choose five words from a chapter of *Dropping In* and create a list of synonyms for them.

47. Create a definition for the term 'antonym'.
48. What are some antonyms for the following words used in *Dropping In*?
- *worried* (e.g. carefree)
 - *shouting* (e.g. whispering)
 - *I laugh* (e.g. I cry)
 - *happy* (e.g. distraught)
49. Choose five words from a chapter of *Dropping In* and create a list of antonyms for them.

Prefixes and suffixes

50. Create a class definition for the term 'prefix'. Create a list of different prefixes commonly used in English e.g. *dis, im, in, mis, pre, re, un*.
51. Create a class definition for the term 'suffix'. Create a list of different suffixes commonly used in English e.g. *able, en, er, full, ion, less, le, ness*.
52. Some words are formed using both prefixes and suffixes e.g. *unreasonable*. The original word (*reason*) is called the base word. Label the prefix and/or suffix, and the base word, in the following words from *Dropping In*.
- unfair
 - disappears
 - misjudges
 - worthless
 - uncomfortable
 - gutless
53. How many other words with prefixes or suffixes can you find throughout each chapter? Create a list.
54. Can you find any words with both a prefix and a suffix?

Homophones

55. 'Right' and 'write' have the same pronunciation but mean different things – this is an example of a homophone.
- How many homophones can you find throughout *Dropping In*? (e.g. *brake/break, hear/here*)
 - What are the different meanings of each pair?
 - When should you use each?

Grammar: complex sentences

56. As a class, discuss the difference between the following:
- simple sentences
 - compound sentences
 - complex sentences
 - main clauses
 - subordinate clauses
 - coordinating conjunctions (e.g. *and, but, or, not, for, so, yet*)
 - subordinating conjunctions (e.g. *after, although, as, because, before, if, than, though, until, whether, while, when, that*)
- Read the following excerpt from *Dropping In* and have students use different colours to see if they can locate each of the above types.

James flinches. There's a hurt expression, a flash of anger and then he grabs at the joystick on his wheelchair. He's having a lot more trouble getting hold of it than he was just a second ago. His face twists up all over the place and there's tension shaking his arm. He goes red as he tries to force his hand to grab the joystick, but it won't obey him. He leans forward and puts his eyes close to it. Then he has it and he turns the chair on the spot and heads for the door. His wheel scrapes the frame on the way through. (p. 16)

- Students should recognise that a complex sentence has at least one subordinate clause. They should be able to define the difference between a coordinating and a subordinating conjunction, and know when it is appropriate to use each.

- c. Invite them to practise constructing a variety of complex and compound sentences of their own.
57. How does the author of *Dropping In* use different sentence structures in a creative way to achieve particular effects?
58. What kind/s of sentence structures do you mainly use when writing fiction? Why?

Cohesive ties

59. Scan a chapter of *Dropping In* and locate different 'connecting' words or 'cohesive ties'. Have students then create a poster of these connectives to use in their independent writing. Display this resource in the classroom. Are any of the following present in *Dropping In*?
- sequencing words (e.g. *afterwards, before, firstly, secondly, then, next*)
 - additive words (e.g. *also, and, likewise, too*)
 - repetition words (e.g. *this, these, those, that*)
 - contrast words (e.g. *although, but, despite, however, in contrast*)
 - cause and effect words (e.g. *because, consequently, since, therefore*)
 - summary words (e.g. *finally*)
60. Give students the opportunity to practise using different connecting words. For example, have them complete the following sentence by circling one of the bold words:

I went to the skate park [because / but / finally] I forgot my helmet.

- Which is the most appropriate cohesive tie?
- Are there some that do not make sense? Why?

Pass it on

61. Separate students into groups of six.
- One student per group must write the first sentence of a story, setting the scene by naming two characters and the setting.
 - The student on their right then continues the story. They add one sentence by using a cohesive/connecting word to link to the prior sentence, e.g. '*Suddenly ... She said ... Afterwards ... But before he could ...*
 - Repeat the procedure around the circle. When each child has contributed two sentences, the story ends. Have one volunteer from each group read their story in its entirety to the class.
 - Which story do students think was the most entertaining? Why?
 - To make this task more difficult, you may like to add the rule that no cohesive device can be reused! In this version, students must then be very careful to note the linking words that have come before them, to ensure they do not repeat them.

Tired words/boring sentences

62. Have students hunt for overused words in a partner's writing or in their own (e.g. *good, said, happy*).
- In pairs, have them then brainstorm alternatives (synonyms) for these words and create a list of new options (e.g. *good* → *excellent, great, superb*; *said* → *exclaimed, hollered, cried*)
 - Have students attempt a piece of writing using ONLY words from their new alternative list (instead of those they ordinarily overuse).
 - Invite them to compare their original sentences/paragraphs to their new sentences/paragraphs.
 - Do children feel like their writing has become more engaging for the reader now that it incorporates a larger vocabulary? Why/why not?

Report writing

63. Have students research what cerebral palsy is and create a diagram about what parts of the body are affected and how. They should then use the *KWL Report Writing Guide* below to structure a factual report.

K: What I already know
W: What I want to know
L: What I have learned

Step 1: Planning

- What do I already know about cerebral palsy?
- What more do I want to find out?
- Can I create four focus questions to guide my research?
- What are the key words for each of these focus questions?
- How will I record the information I find?

Step 2: Locating

- Where can I find the information I need?
- What kinds of sources will be best?
- How will I record the references to make a bibliography later?

Step 3: Selecting

- How useful is the information I have found?
- Do I need to use all of the information?
- What information can be discarded?

Step 4: Organising

- What subheadings will I use to structure my report?
- What diagram/s should I include?

Step 6: Presenting and assessing

- What did I learn from this task?
- Did I fulfil the aim of the task?
- How well did I present my work? (i.e. did I edit carefully for spelling and grammatical errors?)

Four corners (debate)

64. Label the four corners of your classroom with the following headings: *agree, disagree, strongly agree, strongly disagree*
- Ask children to go and stand in the corner that best reflects their stance on the following statement: *'It was wrong to build the couch for James.'*
 - Ask students to explain the reasoning behind their choice.
 - In teams of three, have students' then debate for/against the validity of the claim.

Persuasive texts

65. Based on the debate above, invite students to write a persuasive article aimed at convincing the reader of their point of view. This should include explicit instruction on the following:
- **Modal adjectives and verbs:** words such as *possibly, definitely, ultimately, rather* and *somewhat* which offer differing degrees of certainty. They can steer the reader in the direction students wish them to take.
 - **Cohesive ties appropriate to structuring persuasive texts:** *because, however, therefore, thus, such as, furthermore, on the other hand, provided that, for example, similarly, in contrast, in conclusion*
 - **Emotive language:** words and phrases designed to bring out an emotional response in the reader. This language is used to make an argument more appealing.

Character profiles

66. Have students create character profiles based on a number of characteristics (name, age, physical appearance, dress style, favourite subject at school etc.). They should do this for Ian, Ranga, Jess and James.
67. Using 'inference' (refer to Question 12), invite them to add the following subheadings to their character profiles and attempt to fill them in:
- | | |
|----------------|-------------|
| a. aspirations | c. likes |
| b. fears | d. dislikes |

- e. strengths
- g.

- f. weaknesses

Creative writing

68. Retell the scene where James is first introduced to his class at his new school from a different point of view (i.e. not Ian's). You may choose Jess, Ranga or James himself.
69. Create an alternative blurb for *Dropping In*. How will you make your readers excited and enthusiastic to read the book?
70. 'People always try to take over, like I can't do anything at all. They think they're helping but they're not.' (p. 32). Imagine that you have cerebral palsy like James. Write an imaginative diary entry about your first week at a new school.
 - a. What things would you be looking forward to?
 - b. What things would you be nervous about?
 - c. What challenges would you expect to face as a student with cerebral palsy?
 - d. Would you want your classmates to help you? Or would you want to try to do as much as possible by yourself? Why?

Book review

71. Write a critical review of *Dropping In* for your school newspaper.
 - a. In your opinion, what were the strengths and the weaknesses of the novel?
 - b. To whom will you recommend the book and why?

The writing sequence

72. The sequence below can be adapted for any of the writing activities previously listed.
 - *Modelled writing* (teacher only) – the teacher 'thinks aloud' as he/she writes on the whiteboard while the class watch.
 - *Shared writing* – the teacher has the pen and continues to 'think aloud', but also asks for students' input and ideas. Students are invited to come and help write/make corrections on the whiteboard.
 - *Guided writing* – students can plan their writing in pairs by brainstorming and/or using a planning template.
 - *Independent writing* – students write their own piece and engage in editing and redrafting.
 - *Presentation to audience* – students share their work with one another in small groups.

CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS

Art

73. Enlarge and photocopy a skateboard template and have students design their own skateboard decks.
74. Invite students to research famous skateboarding tricks and create a list of their names with descriptions. Students can then add sketches for each, and present their work as either a poster or a booklet.
75. Have students design a poster advertising the skateboarding competition that Ranga will compete in. They may either use a graphic design software on the computer or illustrate their poster by hand. Focusing on visual literacy, have students consider the following questions when they plan:
 - a. Where should illustrations be placed on the poster? How many will you use? Will some be larger than others? Will you have only a single large image, or a collage?
 - b. Does the design look cluttered or too sparse?
 - c. Do the images relate to the purpose of the poster? (i.e. encouraging people to attend)
 - d. Should the title be in a larger font than the event details? Why/why not?
 - e. What colours will be eye-catching?
 - f. Choose the background colour carefully – is the writing clear for the reader?

Health

76. *Dropping In* is perfect for fostering rich discussion around the issues of student diversity and respect for students with disabilities. Use it to explore the topics of bullying, self-esteem and mental health and wellbeing.
77. *Paper chains activity* – have each student randomly select the name of a class member, then write a positive note to that student on a strip of paper. Connect all the strips to make a class paper chain to read

together and display.

78. Have students research cerebral palsy and create a diagram about what parts of the body are affected and how. See the *KWL Report Writing Guide* (Question 63 above) to help students structure their research and write a factual report.

History

79. Have students research the history of skateboarding. Where did it originate? What materials were the earliest skateboards made from? When was the first recorded competition? See the *KWL Report Writing Guide* (Question 63 above) to help students structure their research and write a report.
80. Invite students to research and write a biography about a famous skateboarding athlete of their choice (e.g. Tony Hawk).

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

81. Create a book trailer using iMovie or Windows Movie Maker. Students can create a storyboard and advertisement for *Dropping In*.
- Source copyright-free images at: www.imagebase.net
 - Source creative commons licensed music at: creativecommons.org/legalmusicforvideos
82. Research the history of 'stop motion animation'.
- a. What are some famous films that have been created using this technique? (e.g. *Wallace and Gromit*)
 - b. By using a digital camera and uploading images in sequence onto Microsoft PowerPoint, have students create their own stop motion animation skateboarding clip of approximately two minutes in length. Note: they may like to use a fingerboard (a working replica about 1:8 scale of a skateboard that a person 'rides' by replicating skateboarding manoeuvres with their hand).

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the author's website: geoffhavel.com

Read an interview with the author: geoffhavel.com/frame_faq.html