

Jane Austen at 250

Aim

To mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Jane Austen in 2025; to celebrate her contribution to storytelling and consider celebrity.

Context

16 December 2025 will mark the 250th anniversary of the birth of Jane Austen - one of the most celebrated writers in the English language.

Jane Austen was born in a small village in Hampshire in 1775. She was one of eight children - part of a middle-class, largely unremarkable, family. She began writing in her teens.

Austen's reputation is built on a comparatively small body of work: just six published novels, two of which were not published until after her death. Her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, appeared in 1811. Her next novel, *Pride and Prejudice* - which she described as her 'own darling child' - followed in 1813. *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814, then *Emma* in 1816.

All of Austen's novels were published anonymously, so she achieved comparatively little acclaim during her lifetime and enjoyed only modest financial reward from her work.

In 1816, Austen began to suffer from ill-health, probably due to Addison's disease. She travelled to Winchester to receive treatment, and died there on 18 July 1817. Two more novels, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were published posthumously and a final novel was left incomplete.

Austen's work is characterised by social commentary, irony and wit. She created strong female characters, and showed that the inner thoughts and feelings of her characters - rather than action - was

suitable material for a novel. She is unusual in that she is revered by both critics and readers alike. She is buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Austen's works have been translated into more than 40 languages. They have been the source for countless adaptations for stage, TV and screen and the blockbusters 'Bridget Jones's Diary' and 'Clueless' were both based on her works.

In 2017 Austen became the face on the reverse side of the £10 note.

Possible discussion points before watching the video

- Who do pupils think are the most famous writers in English?
- Why do pupils think great writers - like Shakespeare - are so revered?
- What do they know of Jane Austen? Can they name any of her novels? [*Pride and Prejudice* is a GCSE set text].

The video

In the video three young poets / spoken word performers who are fans perform short pieces about Jane Austen and her works.

The first is **Emily Kate Groves**, who writes about Austen's creation of strong female characters. The piece she recites to camera is:

What if we did not want to be a wife, what if we strived for more than a life defined by our proximity to men, what then? What if we could boast of the same qualities as them?

Be brave and stubborn, penned to govern our own minds? What if we could be both kind and meddling? Fiercely loyal whilst revelling in gossip, hopelessly romantic whilst wrestling with what it means to love without giving up on ourselves? What if we were more than just merely pretty? Pretty strong, pretty quick, pretty sharp, pretty witty?

What if we were flawed? Jaw-droppingly difficult? Articulate and principled? Intricate and political?

And what if a woman broke the mould now? Would she have to stay humble? Could she brag and be proud? Would she be applauded and awarded the same accolades as men? Could she write with abandon, her words all aflame? Could she claim her own truth without it being tamed? Could she say that she penned it without fear or shame? Unlike Jane Austen, could she give it her name?

The second contribution is from **Casey Bailey**, who considers how Austen's works include acute observation:

Broken Darkness

*1. It isn't always torchlight
Sometimes the darkness
Is broken by words on a page
Words that tell us
That what we call sense
Isn't always sensible
And pride isn't always
Commendable*

*2. It isn't always spectacles,
Sometimes clarity is dancing
From the pen
Prying open the eyes
Of those who missed it*

The final contributor is **Lizzie Lovejoy**, who focuses on writing about 'what you know' and Austen's focus on her particular social class:

*People say "write what you know!"
And Jane let the words flow;
Her books signed from 'a lady'
And she was shady!
Using scathing wit
Because she know where we all fit,
Crossing with ease from one circle to the next
Her text
Is a reflection
Of every direction
She climbed and fell on the social ladder.*

*3. To see everything that is wrong
Is to begin a dream of growth
Half agony, half hope
If nothing else explains then time
does
What we think and say
does not define us*

*4. A pen on paper goes past a
thought
And her observation past
What she saw.
We have been shown
What was always there
And there is no unseeing it.*

*"Write what you know"
So she put herself on show,
Through Lizzie, my namesake,
Whose criticism can shake
The pride
Inside
The upper classes -
She is all of these lasses:
Naive as Lydia, but just as free,
Strong as Elinor, and cold as she must be,
Studios as Mary, kind as young Anne,
Clever as Emma, romantic as Marianne.*

*She listened and shines
Through every line,
Talking directly to you
And the women who
Needed to be known.
Her voice has shown
The power of words.
Strong and Sarcastic,
Cruel and Fantastic.*

Possible discussion points after watching the video

- Jane Austen is the face of the £10 note (ie the side that is not the late Queen / current King). Would a great footballer ever be given that honour? Or the inventor of a video game? If not, why not?
- If it was their choice, who would pupils put on the £10 note?
- What qualities of Jane Austen's writing do the spoken word performers celebrate?
- What does it mean when we say 'Write what you know'?
- Jane Austen's novels are 'By a Lady'. Why do pupils think that Austen published her works anonymously? Do they think a writer or other artist might choose to do that today? [*Emily Mangroves' piece makes reference to the anonymity at the end.*]

Bringing the assembly to a close

Some reflections on the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth:

- Jane Austen is one of the most-loved writers in the English language. She created wonderful characters - especially strong female characters. But her stories are typified by the qualities of all great writing: close observation, well-rounded characters, a distinctive tone, an individual voice.

Links

- [Jane Austen 250](#)
- [Bank of England - The £10 note](#)

Possible assembly framework

1. Entry

Play your chosen music.

2. Introduction

[Hold up a £10 note]. Can anybody see what this is? [Give time for responses].

It's a tenner - a £10 note. Can anybody tell me anything they know about the £10 note? Whose face is on it? *[Notes featuring Charles III were issued in June 2024 - but we're interested in the face on the other side - Jane Austen. Establish that Jane Austen's face is on the reverse side of the £10 note. You could display the note using the Bank of England link in 'Links' above].*

It's Jane Austen. And below the portrait of Jane Austen there's a quote from one of the characters in her novels - a Miss Bingley from *Pride and Prejudice*, who says: 'I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!'

Why do you think Jane Austen's face is there on the £10 note? Why Jane Austen and not, say, *[insert names of current day celebrities /*

influencers that pupils will be familiar with. Gather responses].

[Display Slide 2]

Jane Austen is the first *female* writer to be accorded the honour, following on from Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. She was born in 1775, so this year we are marking 250 years since her birth.

And we're going to celebrate by watching a short video about her together. It features three spoken word performers offering their insights into what makes Jane Austen special for them...

3. Play the video

The final words are: '... Cruel and fantastic.'

Duration: 4mins 24sec

[Display Slides 3-5 showing each of the poems]

4. After the video - time to talk

An opportunity to discuss pupils' responses to the film. See above. There isn't time in the assembly for more than a brief response to any of the spoken word contributions from the video, but the works could inform follow-up activities in the classroom.

5. Bringing the assembly to a close

Today / this week / this year we are marking the 250th anniversary of the birth of Jane Austen. Jane Austen is one of the best-known and most-loved writers in the English language.

She's known for her creation of wonderful characters - especially strong female characters. But her writing is typified by the qualities of all great storytelling: close observation, writing about what you know, well-rounded characters, a distinctive tone, an individual voice. Qualities that we can all try to bring to our own writing.

6. Exit

Play your chosen music as pupils leave.