

Windrush Stories Teaching pack: Creative writing activities

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Curriculum subjects

English, History

Suitable for secondary school students

Rationale

In June 1948 the *Empire Windrush* arrived at Tilbury Docks, Essex carrying hundreds of people from the Caribbean. Many aboard had been to Britain before. Some had fought in World War Two. Most were filled with excitement and hope about coming to the 'Mother Country'.

However, this was not the first nor the last ship to carry migrants from the Caribbean. Nor was Britain an unknown world. Slavery, colonialism, and struggles for freedom had entwined the two societies for centuries.

Using original sources, these creative writing activities invite you to explore the arrival of *Empire Windrush* and reflect on this wider history, including the experiences and contributions of people who migrated from the Caribbean to Britain.

Before you start the activities, we suggest reading:

[Back To My Own Country: An essay](#) by Andrea Levy

Information for teachers

Suitable for secondary school students (Key Stages 3, 4 or 5). We also have activities for [primary students](#).

Key curriculum areas: English Literature, English Language, Creative Writing; Black History Month activities.

Students can pick-and-choose standalone activities, or work through the complete set.

The activities provide students with opportunities to:

- creatively respond to original sources, from photographs to literary drafts;
- work with language and form across a range of genres, from journalism to poetry;
- explore Caribbean, British and Black British history, culture and experience.

Useful links

Articles

- [Back To My Own Country: An essay](#) by Andrea Levy
- [Caribbean English](#) on *British Accents and Dialects*

Videos

- ['Pathe Reporter Meets' – footage of the landing of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948](#)
- [Headline Books: Andrea Levy talks about her novel *Small Island*](#)

Collection items

- [BBC newsprint reports on the arrival of the *Empire Windrush*, 22 June 1948](#)
- [Typescript by Shiva Naipaul on the ritual of 'going away' and his earliest impressions of England](#)
- [Photograph of a woman arriving from the Caribbean, May 1956](#)
- [Photograph of John Hazel, Harold Wilmot and John Richards at Tilbury Docks, June 1948](#)
- [Postcard of *Empire Windrush* purchased by Winston Levy whilst on board](#)
- [Manuscript drafts of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*](#)
- [Your Neighbour From The West Indies pamphlet](#)
- [BBC pamphlet, *Going to Britain?*](#)
- [Claudia Jones' *Caribbean Carnival Souvenir* programme, 1960](#)
- [A volunteer from *British Guiana*, poster showing Diana Williams working in the auxiliary territorial service](#)
- [From the *Island of the Sea: the West Indian Battalion in France*](#)

Journalism: perspectives and voices

Firstly, watch the [film footage](#) of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* which contemporary audiences would have viewed at the cinema.



How are the arrivals being presented to the audience? Consider the selection of interviewees and the questions asked as well as the tone of the voiceover. Why do you think this is the second item on the newsreel?

Next read [the newsprint reports broadcast by the BBC on 22 June 1948](#).

Interrogate the content of each bulletin and note what has changed in each one. Think about why this might have happened and the differing reactions the audience may have had to each one. You can do this with a major news story now by carefully noting its development over 24 hours on radio, television or social media.

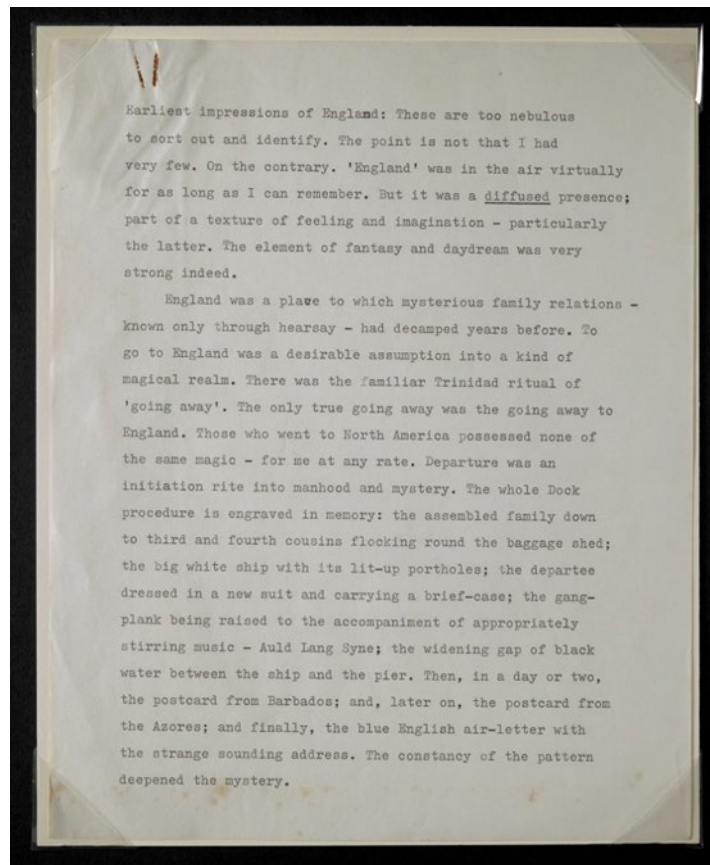
Now,

- Write a series of tweets that might have appeared throughout the day of 22 June 1948 from two media outlets with differing points of view.
- Record a radio feature about the importance today of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948. You will want to include scripted sections along with interviews from a range of people who have either a familial link to the story or who have an informed opinion. Consider how you will frame your questions and select your voices.

Do you want to offer one particular view or present a balanced piece?

Postcards home

Many family members remained in the Caribbean when others made the journey to the 'Mother Country'. [Read the account](#) by author and journalist Shiva Naipaul on the ritual of 'going away' and consider his youthful impression of England.



[Typescript by Shiva Naipaul on the ritual of 'going away'](#) and his earliest impressions of England. © The Estate of Shiva Naipaul, You may not use the material for commercial purposes. Please credit the copyright holder when reusing this work.

Next, look carefully at the photographs of people arriving in Britain from the Caribbean and try to imagine yourself in that situation. Give your character some depth by choosing a name and sketching in a brief personal history. Find five key words to describe the sensations of climbing aboard the ship and five for your feelings as you eventually disembark.



[Photograph of a woman arriving from the Caribbean](#), May 1956, © Haywood Magee/Picture Post/Getty Images/Stringer.



[Photograph of John Hazel, Harold Wilmot and John Richards](#) at Tilbury Docks, June 1948, © Popperfoto/Getty Images/Contributor.

Then, as described by Naipaul, write the two postcards and airmail letter they might have sent home. You could write to friends or family and vary your tone and content accordingly. How has your experience of London matched your expectations?

Short stories inspired by Andrea Levy's *Small Island*

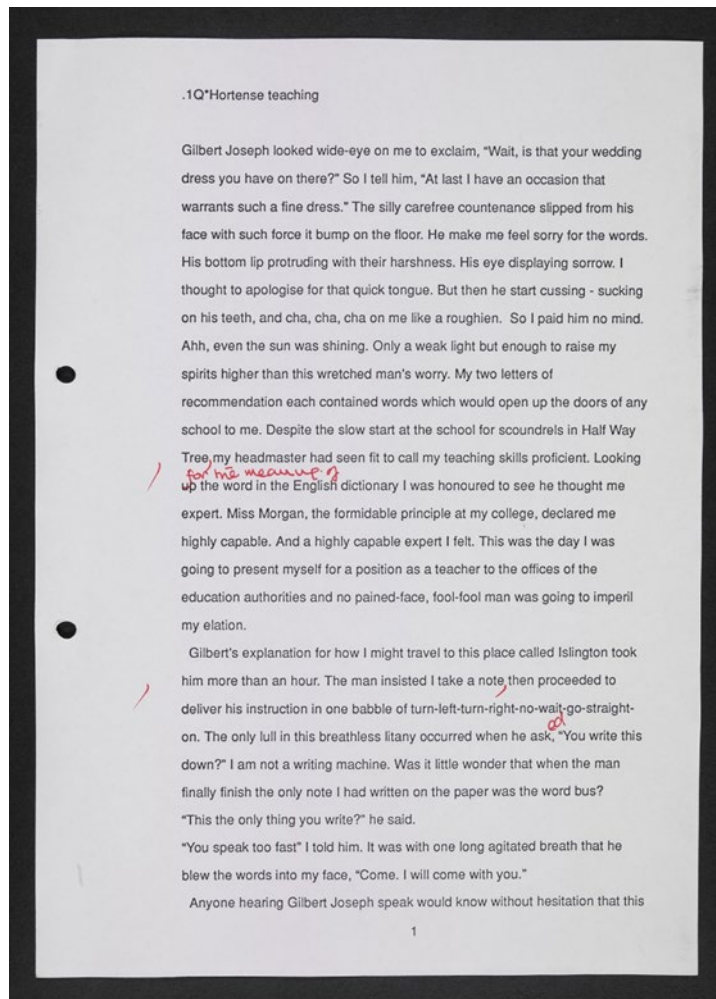
To first learn more about Andrea Levy and her writing, read [Back To My Own Country: An essay](#) and the article [An introduction to Small Island](#). [Levy's father, Winston](#), came from Jamaica on the *Empire Windrush* and Levy draws on her family's experiences in her writing.



[Postcard of Empire Windrush purchased by Winston Levy whilst on board](#)

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Read the passage here which reflects her mother's difficulty in finding a teaching job in England. How does Levy engage the reader in Hortense's situation?



[Manuscript drafts of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*](#)

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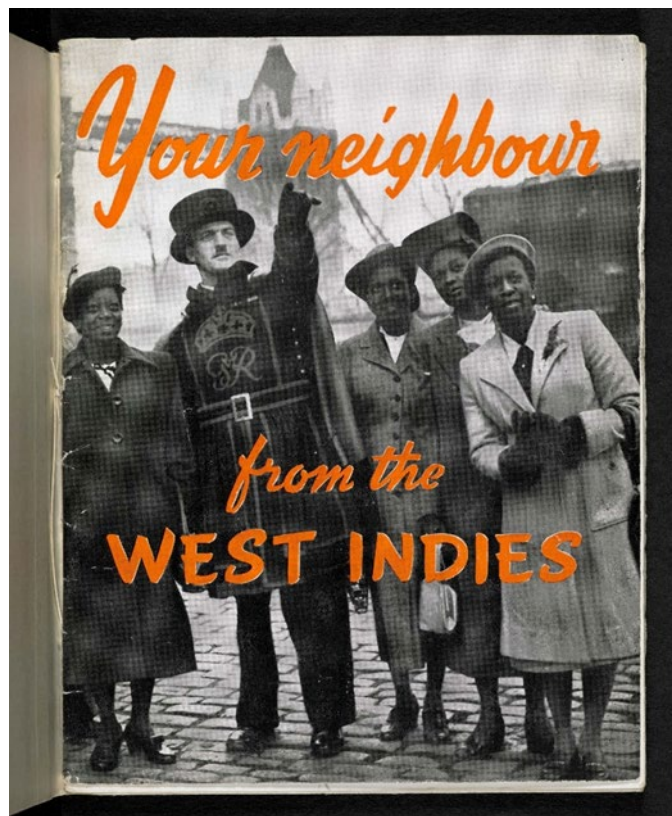
Discussing her novel *Small Island* on the tenth anniversary of its publication, Levy said that she wrote the book 'because a lot of the stories of the Caribbean are stories that people think they know, but they don't' ([watch the full talk](#)).

Could you use this idea of subverting or re-presenting a historical narrative as a starting point for your own short story? You may want to try using elements of your family history. In *Small Island*, Levy uses four narrators to great effect. You might want to experiment with structure by telling your story from more than one perspective, especially if you are exploring emotive and contentious issues.

The title 'Small Island' works on a number of levels which highlight the parallels between the two locations in the book. It might help your focus to give some thought to your story's title at the planning stage.

Writing to advise, guide and inform

[Going to Britain?](#) and [Your Neighbour from the West Indies](#) were pamphlets published in the decade after the passing of the British Nationality Act of 1948 that established common citizenship across the British Empire and allowed all British subjects to settle in Britain. They offer advice on a range of topics and highlight some of the difficulties and prejudices involved in migration.



[Your Neighbour from the West Indies pamphlet](#)

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Study both of these pamphlets and consider the nature of the two institutions who have produced them. How do you think they were received by the intended audiences at the time and how relevant are they today?

Write your own list of the seven pieces of advice that would be most useful to someone of your own age arriving today whose is new to either this country, your town or your school. Look at your list and think about what picture it gives of contemporary society.

Build this into a pamphlet that will offer guidance on practical and social and cultural matters. Would the advice be the same for the student's parents or grandparents? You could include a section for them. Don't be afraid to use humour!

Create your own carnival

Born in Trinidad, Claudia Jones was deported to Britain from America in 1955 for her political activism. She started the *West Indian Gazette* and helped to organise an annual indoor Caribbean carnival, the first of which was held in January 1959 in London.



Claudia Jones' Caribbean Carnival Souvenir programme, 1960

Claudia Jones: We have been unable to locate the copyright holder for Claudia Jones; *West Indian Gazette*: We have been unable to locate the copyright holder for the *West Indian Gazette*. Please contact copyright@bl.uk with any information you have regarding this item.

Look at the artists and performances detailed in the *Caribbean Carnival Souvenir* [programme](#) and consider the subtitle used for the original BBC broadcast, 'A people's art is the genesis of their freedom'. What does this mean to you?

Create a contemporary festival programme to reflect your own life, experience or an issue that matters to you. Choose poets, musicians,

dancers and writers who respond to and represent issues that are relevant to you today. You will need to be specific about which songs or writings they are to perform. You could also include a poem, piece of writing or song of your own composition and record or perform this. Shape the order and content of the programme to allow the audience to enjoy a varied event that creates a balance between a celebration and conveying your message or purpose.

Poetry inspired by Caribbean experiences of the World Wars

Among the passengers arriving on the *Empire Windrush*, several had been members of the British Armed Forces during the Second World War. Many thousands of men from the Caribbean had also taken part in active service during the First World War.

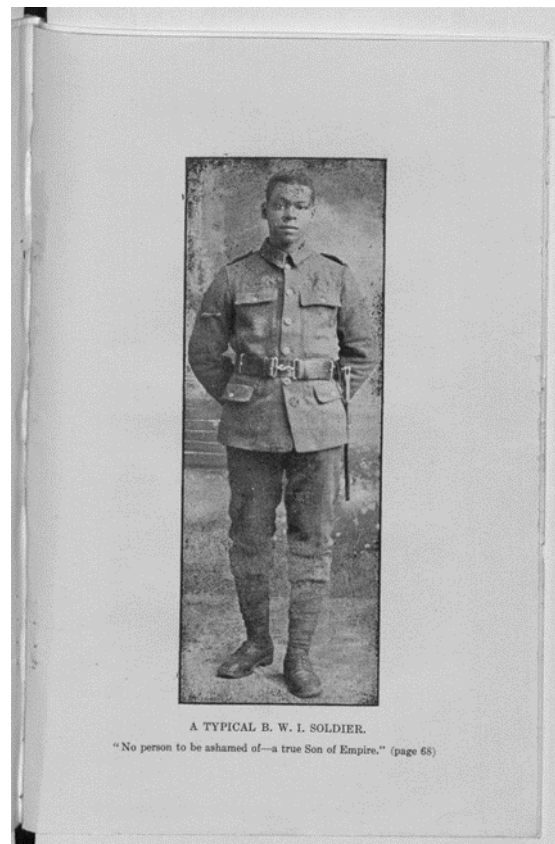


[A volunteer from British Guiana, poster showing Diana Williams working in the auxiliary territorial service](#)

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Turn the pages of [From the Island of the Sea](#) and imagine what it might have been like to take part in a war so far from home. What do you think is

revealed by the caption to the photograph of a 'Typical B. W. I. Soldier':
'No person to be ashamed of – a true son of Empire'?



[From the Island of the Sea: the West Indian Battalion in France](#)

Gather ideas around the contrasting experiences of someone finding themselves in a different country as part of a military structure and consider how war affects social position and relationships. Think about how this is complicated if they are a citizen of a country which has been colonised by another, and if they have experienced injustice and discrimination under colonial rule. You could now write a poem expressing the strongest of your ideas.

Variations of language and dialects are often highlighted in these wartime situations and are an important part of issues around identity. If you would like to discover more about the varieties of English spoken in the Caribbean, have a look at [British Accents and Dialects](#). You could now draft a new poem that experiments with the idea of words and meanings, communication and misinterpretation, or that incorporates the languages or dialects you or your family use.