

Wimpy Kid author Jeff Kinney: 'I've sold 300m books. What's next?'

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What books did you enjoy reading as a child? Why?
- Have you ever read any of the Wimpy Kid books? Did you enjoy them?
- Do you think that children's literature can be enjoyed by adults? Why or why not?

2 Key words

a. Match the words in bold in the article to the following definitions.

1. a series of films, books or TV shows that share the same characters or world

2. something that is very exciting or new and everyone is talking about it _____
3. to usually do something or behave in a particular way _____
4. the time in your life when you stop working, usually because of your age _____
5. stories written for films or television, including what the characters say and do

6. without many jobs or opportunities (of a place or area) _____
7. a feeling of stress or worry because you have too much to do _____
8. being produced and available to buy (for books, magazines, etc.) _____
9. feeling unable to relax or stay still because you are bored or worried _____
10. a new television programme made from a successful existing one, usually about one of its characters _____
11. to learn how to do something well after practising it for some time _____
12. a special right or advantage that only some people have _____

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b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. After a few weeks of practice, Eliza finally _____ and could use the software easily.
2. Many people feel a lot of _____ before an important exam.
3. The Star Wars movie _____ is one of the most successful of all time.
4. Even after he retired, William couldn't relax and felt _____ doing nothing at home.
5. That book is still _____, so you can order it online.
6. The video became a(n) _____ overnight with 7 million views in only 12 hours.
7. Dan grew up in a(n) _____ part of the city where many shops were closed.
8. Greta Gerwig wrote the _____ for the movies Barbie and Little Women.
9. Having access to free healthcare is a(n) _____ that is not available to everyone.
10. Although the _____ was successful, it wasn't as good as the original.
11. As people get older, they often start thinking seriously about _____.
12. Delilah _____ avoid speaking in public, so she was nervous about the presentation.

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As the 20th book in his Diary of a Wimpy Kid series is published, the author shows no signs of slowing down – scripting films, opening a bookshop and making plans to rebuild his hometown

Stuart Heritage

01 February, 2026

- 1 Watching Jeff Kinney sign books is like watching a piece of performance art. Kinney wheels round the table on a chair, signing as he goes. He is totally focused.
- 2 Today Kinney is signing copies of *Partypooper*, the 20th book in his blockbuster Diary of a Wimpy Kid series. Every copy has the phrase "Over 300 million books sold" on it. To children of reading age at any point over the last twenty years, Kinney is a rock star.
- 3 Before he first created Wimpy Kid – about the adventures of a student called Greg Heffley – Kinney was a software engineer. When the first book was released it became a **sensation**.
- 4 Now 54 years old, Kinney is both very tall and very polite. And, for someone who has to be extremely rich, quite normal. He could quite easily be a friendly teacher, or someone who runs a small business.
- 5 Every new Wimpy Kid book is an event. For some authors, this may cause stress, but Kinney doesn't seem to mind. "I've got a whole world that I feel responsible for. People have careers that come out of [the Wimpy Kid books], but I wouldn't call it **pressure**. It's a nice place to be."
- 6 Kinney also owns the Wimpy Kid **franchise**. As well as the books he also writes the **screenplays** for all of Disney's Wimpy Kid movies. He says this is what keeps the books feeling fresh. "My first few books are just like a collection of jokes," he smiles. "I didn't care that much about telling a good story. It wasn't until book 12 that I started to **get the hang of it**."
- 7 If that wasn't enough, Kinney also works as a town planner. When his books started to take off, he used some of the money to open a bookshop in his hometown. And when the store became a success he decided to branch out to the whole region.
- 8 "The downtown is very **depressed**," he says. "The industry is gone, and now you're left with this town where everybody lives, but they don't have anything to do. So what we're doing is we're building. We just finished a beer garden, and now we're gonna put in a pizza restaurant, and then we're going to create a town green and some other things too."
- 9 When a series has enjoyed success for as long as Wimpy Kid's, some authors can begin to feel **restless**. To avoid this, Kinney has written a **spin-off** series about Heffley's best friend, and a collection of short stories. I ask him if he has a number of books he'd like to write before he moves on.
- 10 "There were two goals I wanted to reach. One was book 20, and the other was 300 million books **in print**. I didn't ever think beyond that. And now I've gotta say, what's next?"
- 11 For a moment, I worry that he's about to announce his **retirement**. But no. "When you look at what I've created, it's a cartoon character," he goes on. "Cartoon characters **tend to** go on for a long time. You know, Charles Schulz did Peanuts for 50 years."
- 12 "It's such a **privilege** because, you know, it's hard to break in as a writer," he says. "I'm very aware of how lucky I am to not have to introduce myself to the public when I have a new book, and I like that better."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and decide if the statements are True or False.

Jeff Kinney ...

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. worked in the tech industry before becoming a writer. | True / False |
| 2. feels stressed about writing a new book every year. | True / False |
| 3. believes his storytelling improved over time. | True / False |
| 4. opened a bookshop in a different city from where he lives. | True / False |
| 5. is thinking about stopping writing Wimpy Kid books. | True / False |
| 6. thinks it's easy for new writers to become successful. | True / False |

4 Key language

a. Read the article again and decide which definition is correct in the context of the article.

1. branch out
 - a. to cut something into small parts
 - b. to develop an interest in something new
 - c. to remove a part of a tree
2. break in
 - a. to stop someone while they're speaking
 - b. to make something more comfortable by wearing it
 - c. to start working in a new job or profession
3. come out of
 - a. to be produced by something or be the result
 - b. to leave a building or space
 - c. to tell someone a secret

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4. move on
 - a. to go and live in a different place
 - b. to change the subject in a conversation
 - c. to stop doing one thing and start doing something different
5. take off
 - a. to become very successful suddenly
 - b. to remove an item of clothing
 - c. to leave the ground (of an aircraft)

b. Complete the sentences with phrasal verbs from task a in the correct form.

1. After working in a restaurant for years, Elena decided to _____ and open her own catering business.
2. The new Thai restaurant really _____ after a food blogger wrote about it online.
3. It's really hard to _____ as a new musician unless you know someone who works in the industry.
4. A lot of successful careers have _____ internships and work experience. _____
5. After ten years in an unhappy relationship, Sara felt it was time to _____ and enjoy life on her own. _____

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What does success mean to you? Is it about money, being happy in your life or something else?
2. Is it possible to identify what makes a book, or series of books, so globally successful?
3. Do you think being successful as a writer makes it harder to stay creative? Why?

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6 In your own words

- a. Imagine that you had the resources, like Kinney, to make a difference in your community. Work in small groups to develop a plan for how to do this. Follow the steps.

Step 1: Identify the problem

- Discuss what your local area lacks or what problems it faces (e.g., no green spaces, boring downtown, lack of entertainment for young people, poor transport links, etc.).
- Choose ONE main issue to focus on.

Step 2: Brainstorm solutions

- Come up with at least three different ideas for addressing this problem.
- Think about the answers to these questions: *What would attract people? What would create jobs? What would bring the community together?*

Step 3: Develop your plan

- Choose your best two or three ideas.
- For each idea, discuss:
 1. What exactly would you build/create/organise?
 2. Where would it be located?
 3. Who would it benefit?
 4. What challenges might you face?

- b. Present your plans to the class. Be prepared to answer questions from other groups.