

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

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What books did you especially enjoy reading as a child? Why?
- Have you ever read any of the Wimpy Kid books? Did you enjoy them?
- Do you think children's literature is as important a genre as books for 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. to search through something carefully to find useful material or information

3. a seat that can turn around in a circle on its base _____
4. in a calm, composed way, without becoming worried or upset _____
5. easy to understand or identify with because it connects to your own experience

6. something that continues to have an influence long after it was created or after someone has died

7. an activity or job that you do in addition to your main or regular one _____
8. different forms or methods used to communicate or express something, e.g. film, painting, music

9. carries or displays something such as a name, a mark or a signature _____
10. the person responsible for protecting or looking after something important

11. unfortunate or unlucky experiences, often slightly humorous _____
12. similar to or comparable with something _____

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13. recognises someone or something as the cause or source of something

14. the quality of always behaving or performing in the same way or to the same standard

15. the ability to last or remain popular or successful for a long time _____

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

1. Despite years of hard work, Angela _____ her success to the support of her family.
2. What makes the character's struggles so _____ is that most people have felt that way at some point in their lives.
3. Printed on thick cream paper, the document _____ the official stamp of the university.
4. Even when faced with the toughest questions, Omar remained calm and _____ relaxed.
5. With a career spanning over 40 years, the _____ of the band is truly remarkable.
6. While studying at college, Maisie started selling jewellery as a _____ to make some extra cash.
7. As _____ of the country's cultural heritage, the museum director takes her role very seriously.
8. Told across multiple _____ – books, podcasts, and a TV series – the story has reached a global audience.
9. Already one of the most successful _____ in movie history, the director has just announced its sixth episode.
10. For many fans, watching your team lose in the final is _____ physical pain.

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11. Full of hilarious _____, the travel writer's book has become an unexpected bestseller.
12. In order to uncover new information about the battle, researchers _____ historical records from both German and Allied countries.
13. What's most impressive about Samira's work is its _____ – every project meets the same high standard.
14. Mr Stanton's _____ lives on in the students he inspired as a teacher.
15. Leaning back in her _____, the boss smiled and said nothing.

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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 **akin to** watching an elaborate piece of performance art. Kinney wheels round the table on a **swivel chair**, signing as he goes. He is a picture of total focus.
- 2 Today Kinney is signing copies of *Partypooer*, the 20th book in his blockbuster Diary of a *Wimpy Kid* series. Every copy **bears** the phrase “Over 300 million books sold”. To put that into perspective, Kinney has sold more books than Led Zeppelin have sold albums. If you’ve had – or been – a child of reading age at any point over the last couple of decades, Kinney is a rock star.
- 3 Formerly a software engineer, Kinney first created Wimpy Kid – about the various **misadventures** of a middle school student called Greg Heffley – for the browser game site Funbrain. Three years later, the first book was released and immediately became a sensation, thrilling children with its **relatable** characters and the sheer number of jokes.
- 4 Now 54 years old, and greying at the temples, Kinney is both very tall and extremely polite. And, for someone who has to be richer than God, **unflappably** normal. He could quite easily pass as a friendly teacher, or someone who runs a small pottery business.
- 5 Yet, at this point in his career, Kinney feels untouchable. Every new Wimpy Kid book is an event and while the pressure of maintaining such a beloved series for so long might get to some authors, Kinney wears it lightly. “I’ve got a whole world that I feel responsible for, and employees that I have. People have careers that come out of this engine, so I definitely need to keep the motor running. I’m aware of that, but I wouldn’t call it pressure. It’s a nice place to be.”
- 6 “Every year I ask the big questions,” he says. “What am I doing? Why am I doing this? Three days ago I was trying to state my goals. **Consistency** and **longevity** at a high level in comedy is my current goal.”
- 7 Kinney has become the **custodian** of an entire **franchise**. As well as the books he also writes the screenplays for all of Disney’s Wimpy Kid movies. He **credits** working across so many **mediums** for his ability to keep the books 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. But when those books were adapted for the screen, I started learning about structure. It wasn’t until book nine that I even tried to tell a good story. And it wasn’t until book 12 that I started to get the hang of it. The first book that I’m proud of as a narrative is my 19th book, which only came out last year.”
- 8 If that wasn’t enough to juggle, Kinney also has a **sideline** as a town planner. When his books started to take off, he used some of the funds to open a bookshop – An Unlikely Story – in his hometown of Plainville, Massachusetts. And when the store became a success he decided to branch out and apply the same formula to the entire region.
- 9 “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.”
- 10 When a series has enjoyed a run as long as Wimpy Kid’s, some authors can begin to feel restless. Kinney has toyed with the margins of his universe in recent years, with a spin-off series about Heffley’s best friend, and a collection of short stories. I ask him if he has an end goal, a number of books he’d like to hit before he moves on.
- 11 “Right at this moment, I really am looking out over the horizon,” he replies, slowly at first. “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?”
- 12 For a moment, I worry that he’s about to give me an unhappy exclusive and announce his retirement. But no. “When you look at what I’ve created here, it’s not so much a literary character as a cartoon character,” he goes on. “Cartoon characters tend to go on for a long time. I’m not embarrassed by it. You know, Charles Schulz did Peanuts for 50 years.”

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- 13 A quietly logical man, he writes his books with an elaborate process that involves obsessively journalling and then using a practice derived from engineering called Systematic Inventive Thinking to **mine** the journals for jokes. And this formula should allow Wimpy Kid to run and run.
- 14 "It's just such a privilege to have a long-running series 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. I'm more like a **legacy** person now, 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.

1. The phrase 'graying at the temples' tells us that Kinney looks pale and potentially unwell. True / False
2. The comparison to Led Zeppelin's album sales demonstrates that Kinney has achieved commercial success on a massive scale. True / False
3. Kinney claims he focused on narrative structure from the very first Wimpy Kid book. True / False
4. Writing screenplays for the Disney movies helped Kinney develop his understanding of story structure. True / False
5. The word 'untouchable' suggests that Kinney feels immune to criticism from his readers. True / False
6. Kinney compares his character to a cartoon character because he believes literary characters have shorter lifespans. True / False
7. Kinney's town planning projects in Plainville were intended as a way to promote his books. True / False
8. When Kinney describes himself as a 'legacy person,' he means he no longer needs to establish his reputation with each new book release. 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 divide something into smaller parts
 - b. to expand one's activities or interests into new areas
 - c. to create decorative patterns

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2. break in
 - a. to interrupt someone while they're speaking
 - b. to make something more comfortable through use
 - c. to enter or establish oneself in a profession or field
3. come out of
 - a. to result from or be produced by something
 - b. to leave a building or space
 - c. to reveal a secret about oneself
4. move on
 - a. to physically relocate to 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)
6. toy with
 - a. to play with a child's toy without permission
 - b. to treat someone badly or manipulate them
 - c. to consider or experiment with an idea in a casual way

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

1. After working in digital marketing for years, Ellen decided to _____ into content creation and podcasting.
2. The new restaurant really _____ after a celebrity chef posted about it on social media.
3. It's incredibly difficult to _____ as an actor without any connections in the industry.
4. Many successful businesses have _____ university innovation programs and startups.
5. We've been _____ the idea of relocating to Australia but haven't fully committed to it yet.
6. After 15 years as a teacher, Martin felt ready to _____ and try something totally different.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

1. What does success mean to you? Is it about money, creative satisfaction, helping others or something else entirely?
2. Is it possible to identify what makes a particular book, or series of books, so globally successful?
3. Do you think massive commercial success makes it harder to stay creative and motivated? Why?

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.

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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:
 - What exactly would you build/create/organise?
 - Where would it be located?
 - Who would it benefit?
 - What challenges might you face?

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