A read-aloud for kids, parents and teachers

Read It Together

What Comes Next?

A riddle about what the machine really does

A tells B, and B tells C, "Can a machine think like you and me?"

Sit side by side and turn the page. We will solve it together, whatever your age.

Thirty-five minutes. One grown-up, one or more children, and a question to answer.

Step 1 · The starter game · 5 min

Once upon a...

Say "Once upon a..." and stop right there. The room shouts "TIME!" without a care.

Say "Peanut butter and..." and wait. "JELLY!" comes back, and it comes back straight.

Say "Twinkle, twinkle, little..." up high. "STAR!" flies out. Nobody asks why.

Do this together

Take turns. One of you starts a pair, "Salt and...", "Thunder and...", "Bow and...", and the other finishes it as fast as they can. Then ask each other, "How did you know?"

How did you know?

Nobody read your mind

Did you open a book? Did you look it up? Did you peek at a secret spy-glass cup?

No. You have heard those words together so many times that the next one was the most likely one.

That is the whole trick. When words travel together, your brain gets ready for the next one.

The machine plays the same game, with every word, at a size no person could.

Inside the machine

A mountain of writing

The people who built it showed it a mountain of writing. Stories, letters, lists, chats, guides.

From all of it, it worked out which words usually come after which.

When you type a question, it picks the most likely next word. Then the next. Then the next. Until it has a whole answer.

No brain in a jar. No heart. Just the word that usually comes next, over and over.

Watch your words

Four words that are easy to say

Think. Know. Understand. Believe. They slip out so easily, and none of them is quite true of the machine.

When one slips out, nobody is in trouble. Just say the sentence again without the word. The second try is where the learning is.

> Someone might say: The computer thinks it is raining.
> **The machine put together the words that usually follow a question about rain.**

> Someone might say: It knows all about dinosaurs.
> **It learned the patterns in dinosaur writing.**

Step 2 · The live test · 10 min

Why is the sky blue?

Type the question at the front, or at the kitchen table. "Why is the sky blue?"

Out pours an answer, clean and new. Four tidy sentences about sunlight and air.

Now the real challenge. Say what just happened without the words think, know, understand or believe.

Did it open a window? Did it look at the sky? No. It wrote the words that usually follow a question like that.

Step 3 · Two true sentences · 10 min

One thing it did. One thing it did not.

Grab a partner. Parent and child, or shoulder to shoulder with a classmate.

Sentence one: one true thing it did. "The machine wrote four sentences about sunlight."

Sentence two: one thing it did not do. "The machine did not look out of the window. It has never seen blue."

The second sentence is the harder one, and the better one. That is where the understanding lives.

Do this together

Neither sentence may use think, know, understand or believe. If you find yourself describing the facts in the answer instead of how the answer was made, try again.

The climax · 10 min

It never tasted jelly

It does not look things up. It does not know what a peanut is. It has never tasted jelly.

So if it never ate toast in the morning sun, how did it finish "peanut butter and..."?

Because in all the books and chats and lists, "jelly" is the word that usually comes next.

The loop is closed. The secret is out. Prediction is how the whole job is done.

Next time · Plate 2

"George Washington flew to France!"

Said with total confidence. No pause. No doubt. And completely wrong.

Why is the machine so sure when it is wrong? You can only answer that once you have stopped thinking of it as something that knows.

Plate 2: why being sure and being right are two different things.

For the grown-up

Why this plate matters most

A child who believes the machine "knows" things will treat a confident wrong answer as a fact, treat the machine as a source, and hand over their homework without noticing.

A child who can say "it picked the word that usually comes next" has a handle on all three.

When a child says "the AI thinks", do not correct the word. Ask them to say the same thing without it. The struggle to rephrase is the learning.

It is not a calculator either. It can write sentences nobody has written before. The honest middle is "it composes from patterns". Both halves matter.

Dinner-table game: start a common phrase and see who shouts the next word first. Then say it: that is what the machine does for every word it writes.