13 Words of Bravery

How to be Brave with Words

*Inspired by Roald Dahl’s Matilda*

_The World’s No. 1 Storyteller_

_meets_

_The World’s No. 1 Dictionary Publisher_

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Report prepared by
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INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary tells us that the name Matilda means ‘mighty in battle’. And small but mighty Matilda certainly lives up to her name as she unleashes the power of words to speak up, to fight against injustice and to stand up to the formidable Miss Trunchbull.

Roald Dahl encourages his readers to be equally bold with language, gobblefunking with words and creating sparky synonyms and ringbelling rhymes. You can delve into Roald Dahl’s whoppsey-whiffing world of words with the Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary and the Oxford Roald Dahl Thesaurus, and you can even learn how to insult like a Trunchbull and how to speak Mideous Martian in Roald Dahl’s Rotsome and Repulsant Words.

And what better way to start being brave with words than looking at the word brave itself?

The word wizards at Oxford University Press have analysed over 900,000 pieces of children’s writing using their Oxford Children’s Corpus—the largest children’s language database in English containing the stories submitted to BBC Radio 2’s 500 Words competition—to find the words that children most associate with being brave.

Below are 13 words from Oxford Children’s Dictionaries & Thesauruses which reflect the different ways in which children today write about bravery and the context in which they use these words to feel empowered in difficult situations.

13 Words of Bravery

(in order of frequency in which they appear in the Oxford Children’s Corpus)

- brave
- confident
- daring
- bold
- fearless
- courageous
- heroic
- valiant
- intrepid
- audacious
- plucky
- spirited
- gallant
1. **Brave**

*brave* **ADJECTIVE** (*braver, bravest*)

Someone who is brave is willing to do dangerous things.

He jumped right into action to find out what was wrong, he knew he must be **brave** and he knew he must be strong.

*(My Grandad is a superhero, boy 11, 500 Words 2019)*

Mr Hoppy suddenly felt very **brave**. ‘Mrs Silver,’ he said. ‘Do you think I could pop down to your balcony and hold Alfie myself?’

*(Esio Trot, Roald Dahl)*

**WORD ORIGIN:** the word *brave* comes from the Latin barbarus meaning ‘barbarous or savage’!

**DID YOU KNOW:** the word *brave* is used over 5000 times in the short stories written by children for 500 Words 2019?

**SUPER SIMILIE:** a top simile using the word brave is ‘as brave as a lion’

Mentions of Matilda in the 500 Words stories show children are still empowered by ‘the heart-warming story of Roald Dahl’s Matilda’ and by modern heroines and young activists who are equally brave in their words and actions.

‘You are here today, I hope, to protest about climate change and how grownups are not doing enough to help,’ she started . . . She talked about global warming and *Greta Thunberg* and I . . . applauded along with everyone else.

*(Marching for the Future, girl 12, 500 Words 2019)*

There are many influential people around me who have made it a better place for you to live in . . . Malala Yousafzai gave opportunities for girls to have an education.

*(Earth, girl 12, 500 Words 2019)*

Here are the top 13 qualities that children associate and use with the word **brave** in the 500 Words 2019 stories:
Here are some actions associated with being brave in children’s writing today:

We are brave and we will fight to the end.  
(The Land of Cheese!!!, girl 10, 500 Words 2019)

Be brave and go and talk to the robot.  
(Lucy’s Robot Adventure, girl 8, 500 Words 2019)

She decided to be brave and went up to Rosie.  
(The New Girl, girl 8, 500 Words 2019)

You just have to be brave and hold your head up high.  
(Mum, girl 11, 500 Words 2019)

Our sergeant told us to be brave and keep on marching.  
(The Charge, boy 10, 500 Words 2019)

Here are the types of bravery and contexts most commonly mentioned in children’s writing today. These contexts are also used in Roald Dahl’s writing and even some of the same expressions are used to talk about bravery, reinforcing just how relevant his stories are to children today.

Speaking up/standing up

Suddenly I felt a bolt of anger shoot through me. I spoke up. “I am different to everyone here,” I said “I know that, but I should not be put down a level because of that. I am frowned upon and mocked. I am stared at. Nobody should be treated the way I am.”

(My name is Paula, girl 11, 500 Words 2019)

Another extremely brave little boy in the front row spoke up and said, ‘But surely you were a small person once, Miss Trunchbull, weren’t you? ’I was never a small person’, she snapped.

(Roald Dahl, Matilda)

Trying to sound brave

Suddenly, the queen ant scuttled up to her and hissed. “We don’t accept humans in our land. You are trespassing and if you don’t get out, my children will punish you.” Trying to sound brave,

Ivy said, “Give me back my sister!”

(Statues, girl 11, 500 Words 2019)

‘Nigel Hicks what?’ the Trunchbull bellowed. She bellowed so loud she nearly blew the little chap out of the window. ‘That’s it’, Nigel said. ‘Unless you want my middle names as well’. He was a brave little fellow and one could see that he was trying not to be scared by the Gorgon who towered above him.

(Matilda, Roald Dahl)
Inspired by the bravery of a hero/heroine

*By now she had realised that just like her hero Tutankhamun she was brave and strong after all! (The Night of the Mummy, boy 7, 500 Words 2019)*

Matilda stared at her. What a marvellously brave thing Miss Honey had done. Suddenly she was a heroine in Matilda’s eyes.

(Matilda, Roald Dahl)

2. **Confident**

*confident ADJECTIVE*

If you are confident, you are not nervous or afraid.

*Miss Honey felt confident that she would have no difficulty in convincing Mr and Mrs Wormwood that Matilda was something very special indeed. (Matilda, Roald Dahl)*

**DID YOU KNOW:** the word confident is used to describe a pencil in one of the stories in the 500 Words 2019 competition?

Yellow wasn’t the most confident pencil, but he was still willing to try.

(Matilda, Roald Dahl)

3. **Daring**

*daring ADJECTIVE*

To dare to do something is to be brave enough to do it.

*She admired the older girl Hortensia to distraction for the daring deeds she had performed in the school. (Matilda, Roald Dahl)*

**DID YOU KNOW:** one of the stories in 500 Words 2019 describes the daring deeds of a koala?

Kathryn wasn’t any ordinary koala, she was a daring koala. So she sneaked into Pat Panda’s enclosure and stole some bamboo to make a rocket!

(Kathryn Koala’s Awesome Adventure, boy 8, 500 Words 2019)

4. **Bold**

*bold ADJECTIVE* (bolder, boldest)

brave and daring

**SUPER SIMILIE:** the top simile using the word bold in Roald Dahl’s stories is ‘bold as brass’.

**WORD ORIGIN:** the word bold comes from the Old English bald, of Germanic origin, related to our words bull and boulder.

**DID YOU KNOW:** words like bold can make children feel empowered? A young writer in one of the short stories of 500 Words 2019 wrote:

Brave, bold, daring, dynamic—that was going to be me from now on.

(Centre Stage, girl 9, 500 Words 2019)
5. **Fearless**

**fearless** *ADJECTIVE*

*b*brave and without fear*

The pilot was a young Air Force officer with a bushy moustache. He was very proud of his moustache. He was also quite **fearless** and he loved adventure. 

*(The BFG, Roald Dahl)*

**DID YOU KNOW:** along with fearless persons, children, armies and knights, the 500 Words stories also have fearless frogs, fish and dragons?

He battled the **fearless** dragon with his sharp and pointy sword and defeated it with one swoop of his sword.

*(Sir Slinky Stinky Chest saves the day, boy 7, 500 Words 2019)*

**WORD BUILDING:** the suffix –less is added to the word *fear* to create its opposite **fearless**. Another word for fearless can be made by adding the prefix un- to the word *afraid* to make its opposite *unafraid*.

6. **Courageous**

**courageous** *ADJECTIVE*

*willing to do something dangerous or difficult*

The BFG, with Sophie now sitting on the palm of his hand, stood near by watching the operation. To give the soldiers their due, they were extremely **courageous**.

*Roald Dahl, BFG*

**DID YOU KNOW:** strong is often the top quality that goes with brave and courageous in the 500 Words stories?

You need to be strong and **courageous** to be a ninja.

*(The Chronicles of Parallel Falls, boy 11, 500 Words 2019)*

**WORD BUILDING:** there are at least ten other words (and possibly more) that can be made using some of the letters in the word *courageous*: our, sour, age, rage, cage, car, gas, race, sage, courage.
7. **Heroic**

**heroic ADJECTIVE**

Like a hero; very brave

Already Lavender’s scheming mind was going over the possibilities that this this this water-jug job had opened up for her. She longed to do something truly heroic.

(Matilda, Roald Dahl)

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**DID YOU KNOW:** some of the most heroic characters in the 500 Words short stories are the superheroes? The word *superhero* appears over 3000 times in the stories in 2019 and along with the most popular *Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Ironman, Hulk, Thor, the Flash* and *Ant-Man*, children have created ‘super animals’ such as *Superdog, Supercat, Superfox, Super Sloth* and even ‘super foods’!

Monsterous Masher is the most dangerous criminal in the food dimension and has killed some of the most heroic heroes like Super Soup, Amazing Apricot or even Sally Sinemon.

(Super Grandad & the Monster Smasher, boy 8, 500 Words 2019)

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8. **Valiant**

**valiant ADJECTIVE**

Brave or courageous

*WORD ORIGIN:* the word ‘valiant’ comes from Old French vailant, based on Latin valere meaning ‘to be well or strong’, which is also the source of the words *valid* (from French valide or Latin validus meaning ‘strong’), *valour* (via Old French from the Late Latin valor meaning ‘strength’), and *value* (from the Old French valoir meaning ‘to be worth’).

Captain Marcus was a valiant and determined sailor; he had surfed on sharks, swam with jellyfish and wrestled the Loch Ness monster.

(The Beautiful Tribe, girl 9, 500 Words 2019)

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9. **Intrepid**

**intrepid ADJECTIVE**

Brave or fearless

But it’s all marvellous fun… energy and exuberance and perhaps a touch of self-importance as well because now we were intrepid flying men and devils of the sky.

(Going Solo, Roald Dahl)

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**DID YOU KNOW:** space is a popular theme in children’s writing, and the word *intrepid* is often used to describe astronauts and explorers? Tim Peake was one of the top 5 famous people mentioned in 500 words 2016 and has been a popular name in the stories ever since.

All of a sudden, a flashing light buzzed and rumbled before exploding into flames. Ash clouded the ship so Simon couldn’t see his hand in front of him. ‘What… what… What… Happened?’ shivered the intrepid astronaut.

(Beyond Our Planet, boy 10, 500 Words 2019)
10. Audacious

**audacious** ADJECTIVE

**bold or daring**

**WORD ORIGIN:** The word *audacious* comes from the Latin *audax*—*audac* means 'bold' (coming from *audere* meaning 'dare'), with the suffix –ious added to *audac* to make *audacious*.

*He needed a team of first-rate detectives to help him solve this clandestine case so he chose: Zebedee, Kalgan and himself. It was going to be audacious. It was going to be tremendous. Most of all it was going to be perilous!*  
*(The Adventure of Utter Peril, boy 11, 500 Words 2019)*

11. Plucky

**plucky** ADJECTIVE (**pluckier**, **pluckiest**)

**brave or courageous**

**DID YOU KNOW:** A girl aged 7 wrote a story about a ‘plucky fearless unicorn’ called Sparkle-Light Dust-Shine for 500 Words 2019? *Plucky* is an informal word for *brave*—Roald Dahl uses *gutsy* instead:

*Matilda liked her because she was gutsy and adventurous. She liked Matilda for exactly the same reasons.*  
*(Matilda, Roald Dahl)*

*Bemused, and on automatic pilot, I retrieved Bertie’s lead, strode past the manager, past the busybodies, past the tins, fruit and cereal boxes peppering the floor aisles, and led my plucky dog outside.*  
*(The Supermarket Scamp, girl 11, 500 Words 2019)*

12. Spirited

**spirited** ADJECTIVE

**brave; self-confident and lively**

**DID YOU KNOW:** In 500 words 2019 a boy aged 6 wrote a story about a ‘spirited little dog’ called Smarty Pants who was friends with a rabbit called Chubby Bunny who liked ‘to see how many marshmallows he can put into his mouth at one time’?

‘ Smarty Pants’ is a spirited little dog who loves running and tracking and likes to chase small animals like foxes and rats.  
*(Daring Daniel, boy 6, 500 Words 2019)*
13. Gallant

gallant ADJECTIVE

brave or polite, traditionally towards women

We are the crusaders, the gallant army fighting for our lives with hardly any weapons at all and the Trunchbull is the Prince of Darkness, the Foul Serpent, the Fiery Dragon with all the weapons at her command.

(Matilda, Roald Dahl)

Fearless and determined, Fern strode through the cities all the way to her last stop on this lifelong journey. Eventually, this gallant girl made it to the front line.

(Fern, girl 10, 500 Words 2019)

WORD ORIGIN: the word gallant originally meant ‘spendidly dressed’; it comes from the Old French galant meaning ‘celebrating’, from gale meaning ‘pleasure or rejoicing’ (the source of the word gala).

Conclusion

Oxford University Press—publishers of the acclaimed Oxford Roald Dahl Dictionary and upcoming Oxford Roald Dahl Thesaurus (November)—is marking Roald Dahl Day by releasing its 13 Words of Bravery. These 13 words reflect the ways children today write about bravery and the context in which they use these words to feel empowered in difficult situations. To compile ‘13 Words of Bravery’, the word wizards at OUP analysed children’s writing using its Oxford Children’s Corpus, the electronic language database that contains the stories submitted to BBC Radio 2’s 500 Words competition. The Corpus now has over 900,000 pieces of children’s writing totalling over 386 million words—the only one of its kind in the world.

For more information on children’s dictionaries and children’s language research, please contact:

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Oxford Children’s Dictionaries & Children’s Language Data, Oxford University Press

Discover a world of lickswishy language and unlock your inner splendiferous storyteller, just like Roald Dahl