

## Library competitions promoting libraries, reading and literacy in a rural African environment

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### **Abstract:**

*To promote libraries, reading and literacy, the Greater Tzaneen Library Services has hosted annual competitions for school children with a different book/reading theme every year since 2002. In rural South Africa, especially in poorer provinces such as the Limpopo Province, most libraries are in the better developed towns and not accessible to the rural poor. For this reason the annual Greater Tzaneen Library Services competition was altered from a Reading competition to a Library competition in 2004. This made it possible for all school children to enter, even those without access to libraries and multiple books. The focus of the competition is on creativity and fun and the competitions may be entered in any of the four main languages spoken in the Greater Tzaneen area which are Sepedi, English, Afrikaans and Xitsonga. The format of the competition is different every year and has included posters on books, bookmarks with a slogan on reading, self-made storybooks, drawings of the children reading, comic strips and stories told by grandparents. In the past few years, two new libraries have been built in rural Greater Tzaneen through the South African National Conditional Library Grant and it is crucial that the libraries are seen to be friendly and accessible. The competitions are often the first encounter the rural school children and their families have with libraries and the light hearted nature of the competitions encourages them to take the next big step and visit a library.*

**Keywords:** South Africa, reading, literacy, competitions

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### **Introduction**

To promote libraries, reading and literacy, the Greater Tzaneen Library Services has hosted annual competitions for school children with a different book/reading theme every year since

2002. In 2002 and 2003 the competition took on the traditional form of library competitions in which school children who read the most pages during a specified time were awarded with certificates and prizes. This type of competition is highly successful in urban areas such as Cape Town, where Cape Town City Libraries provide excellent and easily accessible library services.

However, in rural South Africa, especially in poorer provinces such as the Limpopo Province, most libraries are located in the better developed towns and are not accessible to the rural poor. For this reason the annual Greater Tzaneen Library Services competition was altered from a reading competition to a library competition in 2004. This made it possible for all school children to enter, even those without access to libraries and multiple books. The focus of these competitions is on creativity and fun and they may be entered in any of the four main languages spoken in the Greater Tzaneen area (Sepedi; English; Afrikaans and Xitsonga).

### **The competition**

The format of the competition is different every year. Increasingly, a sense of excitement builds annually to see what form the competition will take and schools take pride in entering their students. In 2004 children made a booklet with the theme *Me and my book* or *I wish I had my own book*. The next year the competition took the form of a similar booklet with the theme *I love reading*. Both these competitions were popular, but most entries were from schools participating in the municipality's paired reading programme.

In 2006 the theme was *Create a poster with the theme books* and the 2007 theme was *Create a bookmark in any language of your choice*. The competition rules made it clear that entries could be made on any kind of paper and using any media to ensure that children without access to expensive art materials could enter. Interesting posters and bookmarks were received. Some were on cardboard cut from boxes and entries came from all corners of the municipal area.

One of the most successful competitions was held in 2008. A picture of a space creature and a bookworm, both holding books with empty speech bubbles was included on the competition form. Instructions read:

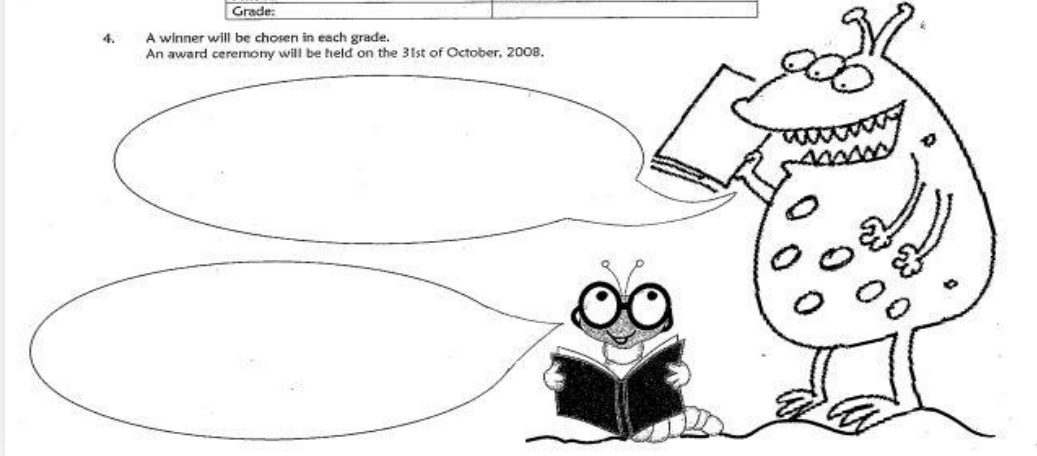
The bookworm and the creature from outer space are talking about books/reading. What are they saying to each other? Fill in the speech bubbles in English, Sepedi, Xitsonga or Afrikaans.

### Enter the G T M Library Competition 2008

1. The bookworm and the creature from outer space are talking about books/reading. What are they saying to each other? Fill in the speech bubbles, in English; Northern Sotho; Afrikaans or Xitsonga.
2. Hand in your entry at one of the following libraries by the 6<sup>th</sup> of October 2008: Tzaneen; Haenertsburg or Letsitele.
3. Complete the following:

Name:	Tel no:
School:	School's tel no:
Grade:	

4. A winner will be chosen in each grade.  
An award ceremony will be held on the 31st of October, 2008.



*The 2008 competition entry form*

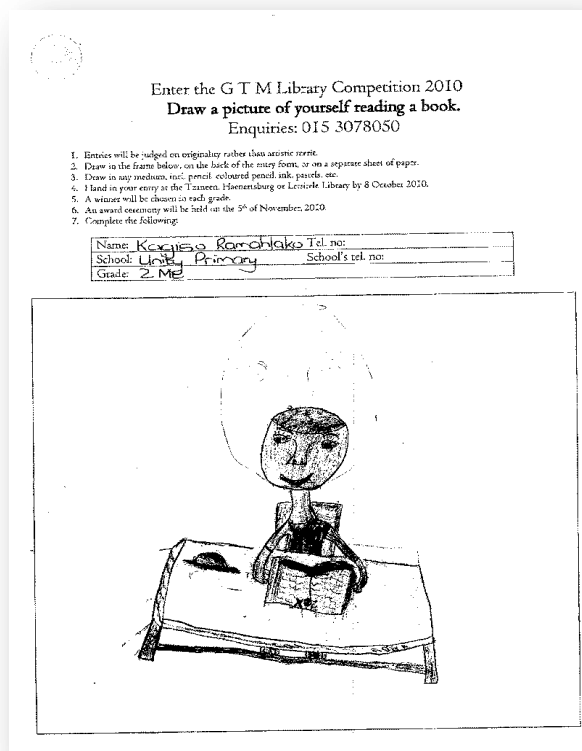
In one of the winning entries the space creature asks, 'Where can I get more cool books like this, Ed?' The bookworm answers, 'Simple. You don't have to go outa space. Just at the local library.' In another the space creature asks, 'Will this feed me?' The bookworm answers, 'Yes, but only if you read it.'

Following the success of the 2008 competition, a similar format was tried in 2009. A picture of dogs selecting books in a library, with empty spaces on some of the spines, was included on the competition form. Instructions read:

What are the dogs reading? Make up your own titles and write them on the blank books in English, Sepedi, Afrikaans or Xitsonga.

The competition did not receive the enthusiastic response as the one in 2008. The idea that dogs could read was perhaps too far-fetched, whereas children had probably become used to the idea of creatures from outer space, due to exposure to children's programs on television. Many of the entries received were repetitive and unimaginative, with most of the dogs reading books called Woof, Bone, or Cat.

In the 2010 competition children were requested to draw a picture of themselves reading. They could do this on any piece of paper, but to make it easier and affordable the picture could be drawn on the entry form itself. Once more the emphasis was on creativity and the use of imagination rather than artistic merit. The large number of varied entries made the adjudication of the competition very enjoyable. Children really took up the challenge to draw pictures of themselves in their own milieu. Sadly, it was clear that the environment where reading takes place is mostly the school.



2010 Competition – Winning Grade 2 entry by Kagiso Ramahlako



Some wonderfully imaginative entries were received in 2011. Children were asked to illustrate the slogan *Reading takes you everywhere*. Entries could be made on any piece of paper or on the back of the entry form. It was clear from the entries that children understood the slogan and viewed reading as an enjoyable activity. In the entries children mostly depicted themselves reading and thinking of a fairy tale, foreign or space milieu. In one entry, a girl is sitting beside a pot bubbling on a fire next to a simple grass hut. She is reading and dreaming of a big house which she labels my future home.

An ulterior motive behind the 2011 competition was to capture local indigenous stories. The competition was titled *A story Grandfather/Grandmother told me*. This was repeated in Sepedi, Afrikaans and Xitsonga to emphasize that the competition could be entered in one of the main four languages spoken in the Greater Tzaneen municipal area. The competition rules allowed for a story told by any senior citizen. Although this competition resulted in a great many entries in the indigenous languages, the stories were disappointing. Very few were actually indigenous and most repeated western fairy tales, mostly *The three little pigs*. An attempt will definitely be made to collect indigenous stories through the competition again, but the wording of the competition theme will have to be carefully constructed.

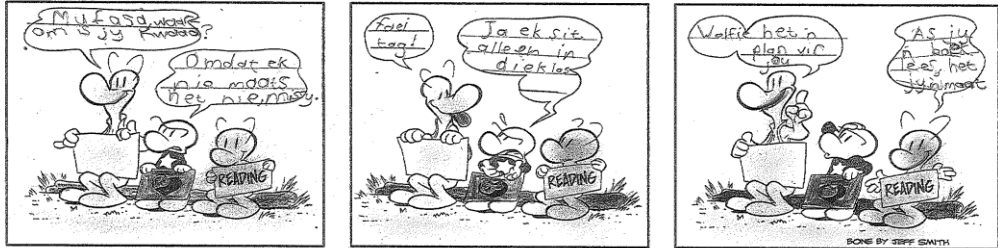
In 2013 speech bubbles were used again, as they take up little school time and only need the entry form and a pen or pencil. These are also fun and allow children to use their imagination. A record number of two thousand, four hundred and nine entries from all four local language, were received from twenty-six schools in the area, as well as from individual library users. In this competition three insect-like creatures are having a conversation across a three-box comic strip. The second holds a card with a picture of a heart and the last a card with the word *reading*. The form asks children to complete the speech bubbles.

What are the creatures in the comic strip saying? Fill in the speech bubbles in English, Sepedi, Xitsonga or Afrikaans.

Children interpreted the comic strip well and understood the conversation needed to be about reading. They also understood that the middle creature is angry or irritated and in most entries the other two creatures placate it by convincing it that reading is good or enjoyable.

 Enter the G T M Library Competition 2013 

- What are the creatures in the comic strip saying? Fill in the speech bubbles in English; Sepedi; Afrikaans or Xitsonga.
- Hand in your entry at one of the following libraries by the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 2013: Tzaneen; Haenertsburg or Letsitele.
- Entries are judged on creativity and originality.
- A winner will be chosen in each grade, from grade 1 to grade 12.
- Prizes will be awarded on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 2013.



Name: Ruan Huysamen	Tel no: 0768139544
School: Tzaneen Laerskool	School's tel. no: 015 307 3601
Grade: 7 FH	Language: Afrikaans

*2013 Competition – Winning Afrikaans grade 2 entry by Ruan Huysamen*

In the entry above, the conversation, loosely translated from Afrikaans flows as follows:

- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: Mufasa, why are you angry?
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Creature: Because I don't have any friends.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: Poor you!
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Creature: Yes, I sit all alone in class.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Creature: I have a plan for you.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Creature: If you read a book, you have a friend.

The 2014 competition asked children to draw a picture of someone reading. The entry form made a number of suggestions which were designed to make children aware of the importance of reading and literacy. Suggestions included drawing pictures of people reading books, computer screens, street signs, medical prescriptions, newspapers, recipes, food labels and notice boards. Interestingly, where the majority of the 2010 entries (*draw a picture of yourself reading*) depicted reading in a school environment, the focus had now shifted to reading in a library. This could be due to library awareness programs such as the annual competition, as well the build up of excitement ahead of the opening of the new Greater Tzaneen library, which opened in the rural area of Shiluvane in September 2014.

Entries in the 2014 competition reflected plausible situations where people need to be able to read. Many showed elderly gentlemen reading newspapers, while some of the more original entries depicted a doctor reading a patient's file, a girl reading a Valentine's card, and a politician reading a speech!



*2014 Competition – Winning grade 10 entry by Newton Mbhungana*

Entry forms are ready by August each year, announced in the local press and distributed through the Greater Tzaneen municipal libraries, to schools and ward committee members. Entries usually have to be handed in at the libraries by early October. Adjudication is done in October and prizes and certificates handed out in early November. The mammoth task of adjudication falls to library staff members and members of the *Tzaneen Friends of the Library*. The best entries are selected by library staff speaking the specified languages and these are further adjudicated by interested members of the community. The final winners are chosen by members of the various library committees who speak the different languages. Adjudicators are requested to look for creative entries. Criteria include something which makes you laugh, smile or think!; grammar, spelling, artistic ability and whether the entries are coloured in, as the aim of the competition is for children to use their imagination, think creatively and associate libraries with fun.

### **Winners**

Once the winners have been selected, library staff create, personalize, print and laminate award certificates, using free certificate programmes on the internet, such as [233Certificates.com](http://233Certificates.com). Winners are chosen in each grade from Grade One through to Twelve, in all four languages. The number of prizes to be awarded depends on donations, so second and third prize winners may also be awarded. Prizes consist of bags filled with donated items of stationery, snacks and even toiletries. These are donated by local branches of Walton's, the PNA, Woolworths and the Pro-Group of Pharmacies. The donors are happy to assist, as they are always acknowledged, given feedback about the winners and shown pictures of the prizes being handed over. Donating prizes to the competition gives these organizations a sense of connecting with the community.

During the early years of the competition, a grand award ceremony was held in the Tzaneen Library in November, during which prizes and certificates were awarded. Although this lent stature to the competition and allowed an opportunity to involve politicians such as the Greater Tzaneen Mayor, the competition has grown too large to award all the winners in one evening, and winners are increasingly from rural areas, making it difficult for them to attend the function. Library staff now visit schools with winning entries during November to hand out certificates and prizes and to use this opportunity for promotional talks on stories, reading, literacy and libraries.

Since entries are not judged on academic merit, but on creativity, originality and the use of the imagination, it is often children who do not regularly win prizes at school that win the library competitions. Teachers say that the library competition certificates mean a lot to the winners and their families. Classmates are inspired to see creativity valued. Librarians are touched by how happy the teachers and the rest of the school children are for the winners. Often, a winning child's parents and even grandparents attend the simple award ceremony at the school and they are extraordinarily proud of the child's achievement. Visiting the schools, most of them rural, and seeing how hungry the children are for information and for something different, light-hearted and fun, is humbling and ensures library staff realize the difference a library, a book or even just a single story can make.



*Winner of the grade 7 Xitsonga Competition Edith Mashele with proud teachers and classmates at Bombeleni Primary School*

In the past few years, two new libraries have been built in rural Greater Tzaneen through the South African National Conditional Library Grant and it is crucial that the libraries are seen to be friendly and accessible. The competitions are often the first encounter the rural school children and their families have with libraries and the light-hearted nature of the competitions encourages them to take the next big step and visit a library. While advertising the role libraries can play in the community, such competitions also make reading and literacy fun and encourage young readers and their families to become involved in community activities. These competitions have become an important strategy for advocating literacy in rural African communities.