

Good writers

The *Talk for writing* initiative lies at the heart of teaching writing. It is not something separate and new. It focuses upon what happens when we teach writing effectively and what happens when children write powerfully.

Of course, we learn to write by practising writing, by trial and error and, most importantly, through becoming familiar with what works – by reading good writing. Initially, we read for the thrilling experience of entering another world. But a writer's reading becomes increasingly conscious of written style and how information can be powerfully composed. It is a curiosity that most artists share. For instance, teachers are always curious about other teachers' classrooms!

Good writers read

Writers love words. If children do not love words, then why should they spend time loitering over reading and writing? A good teacher brings words alive. In some ways, teachers are the guardians of our language – the well-turned phrase, the beautifully constructed argument, the story that will stay in the mind for ever. At the start of the Basic Skills Agency conferences in 2006, I began by speaking about why poetry matters. My notes tell me that I said then:

Literature should jolt the senses, making us feel alive. In school, we only have time to read books that bite and sting... if the books that we read do not wake us with a blow to the head, what's the point in reading? A book must be the axe, which smashes the frozen sea within us. Literature in the classroom should have that extra bite – to surprise, challenge, delight and create wonder as well as the inexplicable charm of rhythmic and memorable language. We should read, explore and perform poems that preserve and celebrate experience, both real and imagined; poems that will act as a catalyst to children's own writing; poems that ring true; poems that help us find our own place in the world; poems that will act as deep grooves in the memory; poems that will act as lights in the darkness; poems that touch our common genius.

Words matter because they create our world and our selves. Without words, thought is a meagre crumb. And it is in poetry that words fall under the mind's microscope. It is poetry that most potently values language, where each word must count. Teachers are the guardians of beautifully used language. Through reading, performing, writing and speaking with clarity and power, through introducing children to literature, we are passing on the truth and power of words.

The most proficient writers in any class are always readers. It is impossible to write any type of text without being familiar with the linguistic patterns. The issue for many children is not so much a 'lack of imagination' but rather a lack of the building blocks with which to be imaginative.

It is constant and avid reading that helps children build up a store of patterns and ideas. These become embedded within their imaginative and linguistic competence, to be drawn upon when writing. Ask any author for advice about becoming a writer and they always say the same thing: 'Read, read, read.' The reading makes the writer.

Children who are read to at home, or who come from an oral tradition of storytelling, embed such patterns without really knowing it, as if some form of linguistic osmosis was at work. At this early stage, it is significant that the child is 'hearing' the language. This matters because we learn

language by hearing it and then by saying it. So, storytelling and rhyme chanting are powerful aspects of acquiring language patterns that might not be met in everyday talk.

Children who experience regular narrative before coming to school all pass through a phase where they demand the same story again and again. While this is happening, they internalise and learn the words by heart. This extraordinary feat is a common feature of all humans who have story early in their lives. One can only wonder what else it is doing to the brain. We know it provides language but it must also build images, larger patterns of thought and abstract thinking. And of course, stories and songs lie at the heart of every culture. They are part of what gives us our humanity.

So, hearing stories (in first and additional languages) and joining in with them is an important aspect of acquiring imaginative and literary patterns. That is why storytelling is so vital. Children need to hear extended thought and to work in a range of contexts that encourage them to imitate and develop their own language. Children need to hear stories, tell stories and read stories. Then they may draw upon this story bank to invent their own.

Many children develop their reading habit through latching on to an author or a series. While this helps them to acquire the ability to read in a sustained manner, narrow reading leads to imitative writing. So, if girls read Jacqueline Wilson avidly then their writing will sound similar because they have internalised her imagined world – the content, interests and narrative style. As children develop their reading, it is the breadth and richness that help to develop their writing voice.

It is also important that children read memorable books. While many children become readers through reading 'potboilers', it is good literature that actually has the most powerful and lasting influence. I must have read a thousand *Beano* comics as a child but could not tell you a single story from them. However, I can still recall Beatrix Potter's soporific bunnies from over 50 years ago! Experiencing good literature provides depth to children's imagining as well as enriching their writing style. It also provides a yardstick for themselves as writers. The richness and depth of our reading enables us to be response partners and to judge the strengths and weaknesses of our own writing.

Children who have not had a deep and broad reading experience will need to loiter over the reading of a text type. Time is needed to internalise the patterns. It may be worth looking at a number of samples of writing to begin to generalise patterns and consider how different writers tackle a text. Of course, reading begins with experiencing the story or poem or non-fiction. Comprehension should deepen understanding and appreciation. 'Book-talk' is essential as a way of deepening understanding but texts can be brought alive in many ways. Teachers will use drama, art, model making, dance, music, research and so on to help children understand what they are reading. When enjoying *The Magic Porridge Pot*, teachers will make sure that porridge is cooked – partly because many children may never have seen porridge. The text has to be brought alive so that children do not just meet texts as critics.

Good writers also read as writers

Most children should enjoy writing. However, when teachers have surveyed their classes, they have in some cases been shocked to discover that the majority of children do not like writing. If children do not enjoy writing, then it may well be that a sense of failure has developed or perhaps writing has become a way of revealing ignorance rather than an enjoyable exploration of our selves and our world.

The focus of teaching should be on the development of the young writer's repertoire. Good writers enjoy the tussle as they struggle to craft and communicate ideas. Writing is not always easy but it should often be fulfilling. Some days a story will flow so fast that a child's wrist will ache. It may even seem that the storyteller in the head is dictating the story and the child is trying to keep up with the voice that is telling the tale.

Writing is a way of slowing down language and shaping our thinking. When children are taught how to weigh their words and bring something new into being, writing becomes a genuinely creative and imaginative act. And creativity matters. Children should come to school and make something positive out of the chaos of their lives. They should paint, draw, dance, make music, improvise, perform plays, make films, tell stories and write poetry. Without words, experiences and feelings cannot be captured. Without the template of language to label life, to explain ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves, we cannot create and communicate. And the opposite of creation is destruction. Illiteracy breeds the fist of frustration.

Now reading and a rich diet of talk do not necessarily make writers. Just as, for many children, comprehension has to be taught, so too does the craft of writing. Children who write powerfully are drawing on their reading, talking, thinking and experiences. Writers are thieves – they plunder their reading but also their lives. Children who see themselves as writers will become alert to raiding the world, always on the lookout for material that can be used in their writing. They see the world slightly differently. They look more closely, perhaps they experience more deeply and become more adept at giving significance to the particularities and concrete details that illuminate.

Young writers imitate their reading without realising it. As they develop, this can become increasingly explicit. Familiar stories become 'mentor' texts that act as a focus for teaching writing and are referred to explicitly by the teacher during shared writing. The mentor text teaches the craft of writing by example. Young children need a teacher who will explicitly help them read with a writer's curiosity. Of course, a really good book can be enjoyed so much that a reader almost wishes they had written it. Good books often make us want to write. In the same way that I remember watching my children copying dancers from the television, a class who see themselves as writers will want to imitate good writing. Being a writer starts with pretending.

Children develop the skill and habit of 'reading as a writer' so that they explicitly learn how to draw on their reading to enhance their writing. Children who do this habitually may be reading more attentively to the language than others who read for the plot and become immersed in the story, without noticing how the writer is creating effects.

The process of reading as a writer involves deepening children's understanding of how texts are constructed in relation to the impact they create. It is about exploring the link between writing and reading rather than grammar-spotting. Writing patterns are noticed and gathered onto wall charts or into writing journals. A stark list of connectives does not make a writer.

No amount of writing rules and lists of what to do can replace the careful re-reading and savouring of beautiful writing. Indeed, writing to checklists that have not been internalised may actually interfere with the flow of composition and make the task harder.

It is also worth mentioning that the bridge from reading into writing can be immediate and, in most cases, should be. In other words, where children have noticed, for instance, how a writer creates suspense this can be discussed, describing how the writer has managed this. The

teacher may then work with the class to use similar strategies and techniques, creating a class suspense paragraph. Then the children use mini-whiteboards to practise on their own. Successful versions can be copied into journals and stored away for possible future use or reference. Such examples help the children make progress.

This explicit process of looking at a text with a writer's curiosity, to see what can be learned and used, helps children to deepen their understanding of writing. It builds the sort of writing knowledge that was described at the back of *Grammar for writing*. But there is still more to be learned because the act of writing is not just about applying that knowledge. There are writing skills and these processes vary according to the type of writing being tackled.

A poet may play with words or learn how to look intently at an experience in order to recreate it. They need to generate ideas and then select the most powerful. Writing poetry involves the meaning and the sound – the music of the words. Sound is part of the physical quality of the writing. The poet listens to the sound as well as the meaning. A good poem takes delight in making music with words. But, of course, the way in which writing a poem is approached and developed is a different process from constructing a persuasive argument. In this case, ideas must be gathered and organised. They need to be supported by facts and evidence. Counter arguments need to be thought through. Powerful language may be needed to express views. Good writers therefore have a range of processes at their disposal. In the same way that readers need different skills to approach different text types, so too do writers.

Good writers plan

Good writing arises out of having something to say – a view, an idea, a story, an exciting event and intriguing discoveries. Good writing springs from the relationship between the writer and their audience and their world.

I am writing this because I know that it will be read and because I really hope that what I have to say will contribute towards our collective endeavour to improve writing in our primary schools. If I did not have the audience in mind and the drive of this purpose then I would be outside in the garden, tending to the weeds that seem to have suddenly decided to invade my vegetable patch. It is audience and purpose that are keeping me chained to capturing this flow of thinking.

Every teacher knows about audience and purpose. However, it is rarely mentioned or actively used. Certainly, the teacher needs to come to the children's writing as a supportive and interested reader, rather than as someone who growls and hisses from the margins. The purpose of writing is to communicate what matters and what we know about. In too many classes, the reason for writing is to 'gain a level'. While this may motivate some children, it will surely demotivate many others. A 'level of attainment' is the description of a child's overall attainment as a young writer and not the driving force behind writing.

Furthermore, crafting style is not achieved just by chucking a bit of grammar at an idea. We need to teach children to write rather than adopting the 'level' formula approach to writing, which reminds me of when I took the eleven plus. I was told that if I used two adjectives to each noun, I would pass. I did... and I didn't! Stylistic formulae have to be considered in the light of writing craft and the effect upon the reader of varying sentences. The idea of writing according to a crude checklist may well be counter-productive in developing motivated, thoughtful and creative young writers. We need to help children to think and work like writers, internalising such patterns so that they can manipulate them to create different effects.

Writers work well under conditions where there is a driving purpose and receptive audience. The purpose and audience determine the content, style and organisation of writing. Of course, sometimes the audience is oneself. For many of us, poems and stories are a satisfying creation in themselves. Also, teachers need to provide worthwhile and interesting starting points for writing – firsthand experiences (objects, animals, art work, dance, drama, video) that stimulate interest and provide the children with something to say and a motivation for communicating. Where the stimulus for writing does not capture a child's interest, the writing will inevitably be pedestrian.

Young writers have to develop the skill of generating words and ideas. This is a skill that can be taught and developed, both modelled and encouraged by the teacher. Ideas do not always leap into the brain fully formed. Often they have to be nurtured and given time to come into being. Of course, the act of writing often helps us think and shape our ideas.

Before writing begins many writers use preparation time to research, mull over, test out ideas, doodle and draw, talk things through, say ideas in their head or daydream possibilities. Such strategies depend on the type of writing being tackled as well as the inclination of the writer. What we can say is that somehow teachers need to help children find and develop their content so that ideas grow. To some extent, the quality of preparation determines the quality of writing.

Early ruminations can be given more shape by talking them through and then graphically representing them. Making ideas physical means that they can be organised. Listing, drawing and planning are key aspects of beginning to fix and organise composition ahead of the business of actually writing. Poems may begin as brainstormed lists of ideas. Stories may start as story maps. Arguments may begin as lists of pros and cons jotted onto a 'skeleton'. It is worth noting that writers tend to fall somewhere on a spectrum. This ranges from those who love to spend plenty of time planning, so that they tend only to write one draft, through to others who like to launch in with a less-defined idea and to allow the story or text to develop as they write. These 'exploratory' writers often have to re-draft their writing as they end up in blind alleys. However, their strategy allows room for new ideas to enter the mind as it works in imaginative mode. In other words, the characters may take over or events occur that the writer could never have foreseen.

While it is interesting to hear how an adult writer works, young children benefit from a strong and simple underlying pattern. However, as they develop, they may need to manoeuvre between the developing text and their plan, making adjustments. What can make the act of writing less laborious is to rehearse the text orally. Poetry sessions may include rapid brainstorms where ideas and words are generated and tested for their impact. Stories can be told and then retold to refine the telling. Arguments may be acted out, put forward and then reshaped; recounts may be retold and reports presented. Working in pairs helps to provide the young writer with an immediate audience and some feedback. Retelling is crucial for most types of text, to allow time to develop fluency.

Good writers draft and craft writing

Shared writing is the main way in which writing is taught. If teachers are not regularly using shared writing then they are not teaching writing.

Shared writing is an over-arching term for a range of strategies. The teacher may model or demonstrate an aspect of writing. This may be transcriptional, for example, the direction of left to right, or compositional. Teacher modelling focuses upon demonstrating what the children need

to learn next in order to improve. Modelling is the direct teaching of progress. The children witness a more skilled writer explaining and talking through what they are doing.

Modelling means writing in front of the children, talking through decisions (though it is wise to have prepared what to write beforehand). Modelling focuses upon demonstrating what would make a difference to the children's writing. It needs to be sufficiently brisk and interactive not to become tedious. As one child said, 'It's boring sitting on the carpet watching someone else write their story.' A crisp, clear focus can be more effective than 35 clever points that actually make writing difficult. The children should be drawn into the spell of creation, making suggestions for improvements or commenting on why a decision has been made, acting as critical readers.

Teacher scribing is the next aspect of shared writing. The idea is that the children have a go themselves with the teacher writing up their suggestions. This may be a matter of choosing words, generating sentences or making decisions about what effect needs to be created and how this can be accomplished. The teacher may offer a challenge or remind them of strategy to be attempted.

Contributions can be oral or written on mini-whiteboards. While modelling writing focuses upon: *'I'll show you how to do something hard,'* teacher scribing focuses upon: *'Now you have a go, with my support.'* It is worth mentioning that both modelling and scribing often happen at the same time.

Teacher scribing is not just a matter of writing down any old thing that the children suggest. The class talk should focus on generating and selecting words and ideas. The children are explicitly engaged in the sort of activity that might occur within a writer's mind. They fish for words and phrases, pausing to select what works best, orally rehearsing and adapting the flow of sentences.

All of this can be spoken aloud as the class collectively composes, both generating and judging. It should be fast-paced and have pauses for thinking time. It should be engaging and may involve the teacher in challenging the children's ideas. Occasionally, they will need to revisit the mentor text, reminding themselves of effective writing. They will need to check the plan and possibly look back to their journals. It is a process that involves looking back – to reading what they have already written – and forwards as the composition develops. Ideally, the children are engaged in making informed choices about what they are composing, relating style and structure to the effect being created.

So, the talk for writing that occurs during shared writing focuses upon composition and progress. Words are generated and then tested to find which work most powerfully. Nothing shoddy should be accepted. The words then have to fit together within a sentence, so the children are listening for linguistic accuracy as well as the impact of rhythm and meaning. Do the words clash or do they spark interest? Do they build pictures and ideas? Then the class has to move on to consider the flow from one sentence to another. Constant oral rehearsal and rereading are vital because the first sentence leads into the second and the first and second generate the third. Finally, whole paragraphs have to be read aloud and tested. In this way, the class gradually builds a text, generating ideas, making decisions and double-checking the impact. They shift from being in writer mode to generate ideas, into reader mode to check what works.

As the text emerges, the writer's aim is to produce sentence after sentence – powerful sentences with the sort of authority to grab the reader's attention. Powerful sentences have clarity, are economical and flow rhythmically.

We begin as a class with an elegant plan. The blank pages await. As we begin to compose, thousands of minute decisions are rapidly made that hinge around generating possibilities, selecting and testing, abandoning and reselecting until the words gain power and flow. In this way words are chosen, sentences form and paragraphs emerge. Constantly, our minds are buzzing with questions and decisions: *Is this the best word? How do these words work together? Is this really needed? Is the meaning clear? What does that now convey to the reader? Does one sentence lead into the next? Is the character or argument developing? What needs to done next on the plan?*

All this decision-making and talk should be interactive, not just the sole possession of the teacher. The children need to hear the questions that authors automatically ask themselves spoken aloud, so that in the end they can ask the same questions of themselves. This involves the teacher modelling the process aloud, the children joining and gradually taking over, with the teacher stepping back. It is the movement from dependence to independence.

However, not everything that happens while composing can always be explained – it is an act of creation and sometimes things pop into our minds from who knows where. There may be no logical explanation as to where an idea came from or how it was generated. It just arrived. Sometimes we cannot explain why one thing works better than another – it may just sound better. Constant analysis and explanation of everything may also slow the writing process and make it tedious. The text should be somewhat breathless and have a sense of flowing excitement. The key is to generate words and sentences, test them out orally and readjust, double-check by rereading and then move on to create more.

The hardest aspect to talk about is the business of imagining – of seeing in the mind a scene or character, of listening to the storyteller in the head. Regular pauses during which the class visualises the next scene may make it clear that imagining is part of the process.

This sort of class creation generates excitement as the class poem or story or text comes into being. It acts as a catalyst to the children's own imagination. It also engages the class in the sort of focused, meditative and furious state of concentration that the writer needs to inhabit. It is a state where words and ideas can be fished for, where the writer hunts an idea, abandons a track, doubles back and re-imagines. It is where a story is imagined and translated into words, or a line of argument suddenly blossoms. In these moments, the word and the experience come under the writer's vision where both sides of the brain are working to create and to control at the same time.

These complex writing processes become increasingly well orchestrated, internalised and automatic through constant teaching, especially where such processes are articulated. It is saying difficult things aloud that helps us all in the end to be able to say them silently in our heads. Eventually, the children hear the questions they need to ask and aspects of writing, such as choosing a powerful verb, become an automatic part of their repertoire. They can hold an internal dialogue with themselves about the choices available and consider how effective a particular word or phrase will be, or how well their writing reads.

For developing writers it is very helpful for these processes to be explored through talk, so that understanding and ability can be developed in a collaborative and supportive learning context, externalising and sharing the thinking involved in the writing process so that it can ultimately be internalised and individualised. It is this developmental exploration, through talk, of the thinking and creative processes involved in being a writer, that we are calling *Talk for writing*.

In the pedagogic approach embedded in the Primary Framework such *Talk for writing* needs to happen at all of three levels:

- **teacher talk:** the verbalisation of the thought processes involved in writing as the teacher is demonstrating and modelling various stages or aspects of the writing process
- **supported pupil talk:** structured and scaffolded opportunities for children to develop and practise *Talk for writing*, through class and group conversations and activities
- **independent pupil talk:** opportunities for children to develop and practise *Talk for writing* in pairs and small groups, independently of the teacher.

What I have described above may sound complex. However, it is worth remembering that the teacher controls what is happening by providing boundaries to the composition.

- Work within the framework of the text's plan.
- Keep to the plan.
- Know what the paragraph is about and where it should lead.
- Let the children manoeuvre within the paragraph but avoid being tempted by wild ideas that will lead the composition in an unexpected direction.

In the end, we are teaching. There are certain aspects upon which we must focus, to help the children make progress. These decisions have arisen out of assessment. Not everything has to be discussed – limit the talk to focus clearly upon what needs to be developed. Keep the composition, therefore, simple and clear. After all, if you are working with Year 2 children you will only need to be writing at level 3. Anything too complex is showing off rather than teaching.

Good writers reread

Almost every writer that I have met says the same thing. They read their work aloud. It is the reading aloud that helps to hear how it sounds. We shift from being the writer into listening to our writing, as readers. It helps us hear where the writing lacks flow and is clumsily phrased, as well as seeing mistakes. If the author finds a sentence hard to read aloud then you can be pretty certain that anyone else will struggle and probably give up. Good prose flows and it is easy to read.

The habit of rereading can be encouraged through response partnering but this has to be taught on a regular basis as a part of shared writing. The teacher may use her own writing to model revising or show a volunteer's writing. Response partnering allows the author to talk through their intentions and to try it out on an audience. Read aloud to hear the effect of writing. Read silently to see inaccuracy.

One of the most important aspects of feedback is to make sure that it focuses upon what works before moving into how the writing might develop or be made more accurate. Many writers feel that their writing does not exactly get written – for writing is often rewritten. Of course, this can be off-putting and tedious for children so the idea of simple polishing where the writing is tweaked may be more appropriate.

Line editing is a powerful skill to develop – knowing when to cut or expand or when to turn something vague into a telling detail. David Almond and I worked on a simple formula for editing. We decided that you can add on, add in, change, reword or use special effects such as imagery or alliteration. And that is basically it. Editing hinges around the skill of constantly testing the words and the sentences to gain clarity, economy, power, coherence and flow.

Years ago, one of my daughters was receiving feedback at a ballet exam. The examiner's comment was: 'Now vary'. That is also good advice for a writer. A string of sentences that start in the same way, or share a similar underlying pattern, will probably make for dull reading. The skill is to vary words and sentences and paragraph patterns constantly to hook the reader's interest.

All of this has more purpose if the writing is to be read by a wide audience. Publishing provides the motive for polishing language. It is perhaps worth adding that some teachers pay more attention to the writing than the author. Writing development comes through developing the writer. That is why writing conferences and guided writing can be so powerful.

Good writers transcribe efficiently

Good writers have developed automatic strategies for recording composition. For many children, scruffy handwriting leads to a poor self-image and a sense of failure. Most children should be able to write fluently and neatly. Strugglers benefit from a laptop.

In the same way, automatic spelling liberates writing. By the end of Key Stage 2, most level 3 writers have poor handwriting, weak spelling and poor sentence construction. This has eroded their self-confidence and diverted their minds' attention from composition and engagement. In the earliest stages, storytelling, drawing, class and group composition should all support the young child's ability to compose. Transcription skills may take longer to develop for some but, as long as children see themselves as composers, as storytellers, as long as they have a positive audience for their learning, transcription skills catch up and liberate creativity. It is the other side of the coin to reading where, early on, children have to learn how to decode automatically in order to liberate their understanding, pleasure and appreciation of reading.

Good writers have attitude

Writing is not always easy. Some days it flows. Other days it is hard. Some days nothing happens at all. Good writing requires the orchestration of many skills. Expression may always lag behind comprehension. While I understand some of Shakespeare, I could never write like Shakespeare. But good writers know it is worth persevering. They have had the sense of satisfaction from audience appreciation, from creating a beautiful book, from telling stories to another class, from performing their plays and poems, from presenting an argument through to the thrill of passing on fascinating information. Also they have experienced how the tussle with words can bring into being something new, something beautiful, something that you did not know before.

Looking at a strong level 5 story, one cannot fail to be impressed by the skill of these young writers. To compress into such a short space and time a perfectly crafted narrative is an amazing accomplishment. The short story is accepted among writers as the hardest form. Indeed, I sometimes wonder what percentage of the population could write as effectively. My experience is that this whole endeavour has to involve a considerable amount of encouragement and praise that focuses upon what the child has accomplished. Why bother to tackle something so demanding, if you are not going to be praised for such an intellectual and imaginative effort?

For the writer has to commit themselves from the start to the story, poem or text. If they do not fully enter its world then it will be false and fall flat. If they manage the demands of fierce, concentrated, imaginative energy, then the experience of writing becomes exhilarating. As one seven-year-old once said to me, '*What I like about writing is you never know what is going to happen.*' The creative writer knows what it is like to create. And creativity matters because it makes us all special. We can all succeed in this but all of us will succeed uniquely.