

Writer-talk

Children will implicitly internalise language patterns and reuse them in their writing, if they read a lot, or read repetitively, or are read a regular bedtime story. It is probably a matter of quantity.

However, this can be made increasingly explicit in order to develop the habit of reading with a writerly eye and a writer's curiosity, wondering, *How did the author do that?* Because in a minute, we are going to attempt the same sort of thing... In this sense, it is reading with a view to imitating a writer but not just copying.

This aspect of learning to write is one that many writers instinctively know because their advice to young writers is inevitably, *if you want to write then read, read, read*. Reading with a writer's eye can help to deepen understanding of how language has been crafted to create different effects – a writer's knowledge.

This sort of attentive reading that consciously looks at the crafting of writing can help children see how other writers have handled narrative. This is especially useful when considering something difficult that a child would like to attempt. Of course, such 'attentive' reading also helps the reader to internalise the patterns. Where the writing is especially effective it may also trigger the imagination. It acts like a catalyst. Good writing makes you want to write yourself. It also acts as a yardstick so that when you are writing and wondering whether what you have written is any good, it is your previous reading that helps you make that judgement.

In some ways this is quite hard – and that is why it is helpful to begin by reading for pleasure, to feed the imagination, and then to move on and read more deeply, to dig away at the meaning and deepen understanding. Once that is done – once the story has been discussed, acted, painted... then there may be space to move on and consider the words from a writer's angle.... Both what makes something effective and what makes something a weak piece of writing. Remember, it is easier to spot other people's weaknesses than our own because we are reading as a reader rather than as the writer. Of course, it is more obvious in music when a musician plays a wrong note. To children, identifying weaknesses and successes in reading can be harder. Bum notes are easy to notice.

When writers in a class read together as writers, they begin to look carefully, reading more slowly than before, trying to notice what works. *How was this magic constructed?* The class can discuss what works and then move on to trying it out for themselves. In this way, stylistic features can be constantly noticed, referred to, discussed, collected and then imitated until they become an automatic part of the class's repertoire. In the end, this sort of curiosity can become a habit that children apply when they are reading independently.

Those of us who took degrees or A Levels in English are used to coming to a text in 'critic' mode, to consider a story as a completed object. However, 'reading as a writer' involves considering how the story is 'made' as well as the processes that got it there. So, what also needs revealing during shared writing are the thought processes that occur *before, during and after* writing. This is made explicit by using *Talk for writing*. We need to look beneath the surface to think about the writer at work. Anyway, let's now consider what can be learned by 'reading as a writer'.

Big patterns

First of all, the overall pattern, theme of a text and the 'story idea' can be explicitly considered. There is a long-standing tradition in identifying different sorts of narrative patterns that are constantly recycled. Many short stories and picture books lend themselves to children drawing the story map and moving on to draw a story mountain, graph or flow chart that shows the key scenes. This helps to unpick the plot pattern. If children then keep a bank of such patterns in a writing journal, they can be reused on many occasions. Later on they may begin to blend different patterns together to create new stories.

One of the advantages of getting used to sorting out an underlying pattern is that this can be used as a basis for children's own writing. A flow chart format helps to structure a narrative and for weaker writers even provides paragraphs. So, many stories act as blueprints for the children's own compositions. Of course, for the text to be well and truly internalised, the children have to 'loiter' with it for some time – rereading, dramatising, discussing, focusing on aspects until the text has entered the long-term working memory – until they almost 'own' the text because they are so familiar with it. This sort of intense engagement influences the writing.

Key narrative patterns for primary children include: problem/resolution stories, cumulative tales, quests, there and back again, warning stories, defeating the monster, wishing tales, character flaw stories, lost and found, Cinderella, dangerous setting stories, stories that involve a threat getting closer and closer, stories based on doing something wrong, for example, lying or stealing, stories with movement, such as rags to riches, foolishness to wisdom, dangerous settings.

Building blocks and pacing

In narrative, the larger building blocks can also be thought about – *how does a writer build and develop a character, handle dialogue, use setting to create atmosphere, build suspense, handle action, open a tale invitingly or draw a story to a conclusion?*

When working with children, it can be easy to fall into 'spotting grammar' rather than thinking like a writer. The key to this lies in considering the links between effect and style. *What effect has the writer created? How was this accomplished? How does it work?* Consider the impact of words, the imagery, the sentences and the paragraphs.

Young writers find it hard to handle 'pacing'. They may dash off parts of a story that needed more time – or dwell on an aspect that is irrelevant to the plot. Some move too quickly, recounting events. Others add in irrelevant detail. Pacing lies at two levels.

- Planning out the scenes that are needed and knowing which sections to dwell upon. This involves manipulating the large 'chunks' or building blocks of a story.
- Learning how to speed up or slow down within an event or paragraph, varying sentences to create effects. Weak writers often dash over scenes so that by the time they are halfway down the page a dozen key events have occurred. They may also add in irrelevant detail.

Over the last eight years there has been considerable effort made at word and sentence level. For instance, children are encouraged to use well-chosen adjectives that introduce a new element (*shy* giant rather than *big* giant) or deploy an adverb at the start of a sentence to

emphasise *how* someone feels (*slowly, he woke up* rather than *he woke up slowly*). Perhaps we now need to help children think at text level, with the paragraph as the main unit of composition.

Paragraphs can be talked about rather like mini-scenes. They are the chunks that indicate where the writer has to slow down, using detail to bring the story alive. When a new paragraph begins, the narrative changes, possibly taking a new direction. Changes may occur in the speaker, a shift in time, a new event, place or character. A new paragraph can introduce a surprise or twist. A paragraph shift changes the rhythm of the story. A long, descriptive paragraph may slow the pace while one punchy sentence may speed up events.

Generally, the start or end of a paragraph carries the most meaning. The opening usually introduces the main thrust of the paragraph or acts as a form of transition from the previous scene. (It is also worth keeping an eye on paragraphs to check that they are not becoming too long for the reader.)

While reading, it is worth building up a sense of different paragraph types such as suspense, action, hiding, lulling the reader into security, chasing, building atmosphere and so on. These building blocks can then be manipulated to create new stories. It is also worth collecting strategies to hook a reader.

Teaching writer-talk

Over the years, this process of considering reading with a view to seeing what can be learned as a writer has been referred to as 'getting under the car bonnet' of writing, to see how it works. This makes good sense, although giving a young writer too many things to be thinking about while composing may actually make the process harder. Too many rules can make writing too demanding. That is why plenty of reading is needed, with plenty of practice, so that patterns are internalised and become just second nature.

The other issue to consider is that the thinking needs to be done by the children; just dishing out lists and frames is not necessarily helping the children to gain the habit of reading in a writerly manner. Finally, it cannot be stressed too much that this involves the children thinking about the link between the effect the writer creates and how this has been achieved. It is not just a matter of spotting grammar. It is about beginning to think and behave like a writer, making choices and thinking about the impact of these choices on the reader.

Of course, the more the teacher models this sort of behaviour, talking aloud in writerly mode, the more the children are able to think in this way, drawing on their reading to inform their writing. Essentially, the process is as follows.

Read

- After reading as a reader, move on to read as a writer, problem-solving to see how texts are structured.
- Notice the effects.
- Consider how they are created.
- Writers are thieves – what can you use from this text?

Learn

- Discuss how the author created impact.
- Label the writing technique.
- List it on a wall chart.
- Children write key examples in their writer's journal for future reference.
- Collect more examples.

Apply

- Teacher models on a board, explaining aloud.
- Children try it out on mini-whiteboards.
- Teacher uses in demonstration and shared writing.
- Children use the strategies in their own writing.

Oral story games

There are many different ways to begin to generate a story and all teachers will have their own bag of tricks. Oral games are an important part of developing fluency with language structures as well as generating interesting patterns.

- **Louisa's connective game:** invent a story and use connectives on cards (or characters, settings, story triggers).

Once upon a time one day... first... then... next... after that... after a while... a moment later... the next day... meanwhile... soon... at that moment... suddenly... unfortunately... unluckily... luckily... so... although... however... as soon as... now... finally... eventually...

- Complete a sentence, using a conjunction, for example, *Gita ran home because...*
- Play 'Unfortunately/luckily', in pairs.
- Pass a story, word by word, in pairs or small groups.
- Pass a story, sentence by sentence, in pairs or small groups.
- Add in a challenge to either of the above.
- Build a character through questioning, in pairs. One of the pair starts by saying the name of their character and a bit about them. The partner helps to build the character through questioning: *Tell me more about...* or *Now tell me about...* With the class, make a list of useful questions to help someone bring a character alive. They must discover *how* the character is feeling and *why*.

- Play 'Painting the picture', in pairs. This is a game to develop a setting based on the old parlour game, 'In the city of Rome'. One partner paints the scene for the listener: 'You can see... hear... feel.... now you can see (something happens).' First, just fill the canvas, then bring on an event.

Moving into writing as a reader

During shared writing, we need to shift from talking like a grammarian deploying sentence structures into behaving more like a writer. This is made easier by referring to mentor texts and focusing the talk onto writing.

Now, I want to introduce a monster like at the start of Ted Hughes just to give this a memorable, rhythmic start and get the reader imagining...

If we can awaken the curiosity that a writer has in noticing how others write, then the power to teach themselves when they are reading will deepen their writing. We need to develop greedy readers and then turn them into writers who are attuned to the daily possibility of learning how to write from their reading – the curiosity of a fellow writer.