Pedagogy and Practice: Teaching and Learning in Secondary Schools

Unit 14: Developing writing

Senior leaders, subject leaders and teachers in secondary schools

Creating effective learners

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department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence

How to use this study guide

This study unit offers some practical strategies that teachers use to develop writing. The techniques suggested are tried and tested; they draw on both academic research and the experience of practising teachers.

By working through this guide, you can build your teaching repertoire step by step, starting with strategies that are easy to implement and moving on to those that will help pupils develop their skills still further. The unit contains 'reflections', to help you reflect on an idea or on your own practice, as well as practical tips and tasks to help you consider advice or try out strategies in your classroom. There are case studies to exemplify particular points, a summary of the research and some suggestions for 'next steps' and further reading. The final page invites you to reflect on the material and to set your personal targets for the future.

You can work through this unit in a number of ways:

- Start small; choose one class to work with. Ask another teacher to help by talking through what you intend to do and to act as a mentor.

- Work with another teacher or group of teachers who teach the same class. Work together on your approach to developing writing. After three weeks compare notes. Discuss which strategies are the most effective and why.

- Find someone to pair up with and team-teach. Design the tasks together and divide the role of teacher in the lesson between you.

- Work with a small group of teacher-researchers within your school. Use the guide to help you focus your work as a professional learning community. Record successes in your CPD portfolio.

- Identify sections of the unit that are particularly relevant to you and focus on those.

There is space in this study guide for you to write notes and responses to some of the questions, but you may also find it helpful to keep a notebook handy. For some tasks, you might want to make an audio recording or video of yourself in action so you can review your work more easily. You could add this, along with any other notes and planning that you do as part of your work on this unit, to your CPD portfolio.

The evidence of work you gather in your portfolio could count as points towards accreditation of an MA, or could support your application for membership of a professional body, such as the General Teaching Council of England (GTCE). It could also be used to support an application to reach threshold or Advanced Skills Teacher status.

You will need access to video sequence 14, Developing writing when working through this unit.

Developing writing

Contents

Introduction

Writing is probably the most complex task we undertake. In order to be successful, we need to know who we are writing for, what we should write and how we should write it. We also need to know how to spell and how to punctuate so that our meaning is clear to the reader.

It would be helpful if you worked through this unit with a colleague who teaches in the same year as you.

Successful writers:

- know where they are going and how the writing will end;

- can hear the writing inside their heads and make judgements about it so they can edit it;

- use reading to inform writing;

- have a range of styles and text types to choose from;

- are aware of the needs of the reader;

- rehearse and re-read;

- concentrate;

- attend to their known weaknesses.

Common issues

- Pupils may do very little writing in some subjects at Key Stage 3 and then may be expected to start writing at Key Stage 4 with little to build on.

- Writing is often set for homework where there may be little support.

- Pupils may not be confident about having something to write.

- Pupils may not transfer their learning about writing from one subject to another, perhaps because of a lack of agreed common approaches.

- Teachers may be insecure about teaching the structures for text and sentences.

- Additional language learners, those from ethnic minorities and those from socially challenging backgrounds may have a limited range of formal styles.

Resolving the issues

You can create purposeful contexts for pupils' writing by:

- establishing both the purpose and audience for the writing;

- providing a model of the text type;

- ensuring that the writers have something to say;

- giving writers opportunities to develop, sharpen and revise ideas;

- encouraging collaboration during planning, drafting and proofreading;

- giving pupils access to reference materials to support writing, for example word banks, dictionaries and thesauri;

- providing feedback on strengths and ways to improve, both during and after the writing.

Task 1

Research   20 minutes

Read the summary of research on pages 16–18 and think about:

- why environmental approaches seem to be the most effective;

- how you currently set writing tasks for your pupils;

- to what extent reading plays a part in the successful completion of writing tasks;

- how explicit you are about sentence structures when you set the tasks.

Task 2

Pre-unit task   30 minutes

This task, together with task 13, will allow you to evaluate improvements made in pupils' writing and the effectiveness of the strategies you will develop. Work with a colleague who teaches in the same year as you and identify six pupils each, as far as possible from across the range of ability, each from a different class. This could be done at the beginning of a term.

Bring the written work for these six pupils to a joint meeting and identify as far as you can the strengths and weaknesses of the writing.

You can then bring the same pupils' writing to another joint meeting after you have implemented some of the strategies and consider any improvements in preparation for task 13.

1 Establishing a purpose for writing

Pupils need to know what they are writing and who they are writing for. It helps if you can define this with them. Purposes for writing are about the text type(s) involved, and the text type(s) go some way towards defining the overall structure and the kinds of sentence required.

Major text types are:

- instruction;

- recount;

- explanation/description;

- information;

- persuasion;

- discussion;

- analysis;

- evaluation.

As pupils move through Key Stages 3 and 4, the text types tend to become blurred. Pupils will need to explain/inform to persuade; they will need to use information to support discussion and explain points of view, but explicit knowledge about the various types helps them combine them effectively.

You may need to refer to *Literacy across the curriculum* (DfEE 0235/2001) to remind yourself of the detailed structures of the text types. You may also find it helpful to look at unit 13 Developing reading, where there are tasks on subject-specific vocabulary.

Creating a context for writing

Description of the writing task	Helpful	Partly helpful	Unhelpful
1 Write a recipe for a party milk-shake for publication in a Christmas edition of a teenage magazine.			
2 Was King John a good or bad king?			
3 Write a letter to your MP protesting against the building of new houses on local greenbelt land.			
4 Write up your castle project.			
5 Produce two pages of writing on the title 'How I survived the rainforest'.			
6 Write a report of your investigation into the magnetic effect of conducting wire.			
7 Rewrite in your own words the story of Prometheus.			
8 Write up your mathematics investigation.			
9 Produce a script for a three-minute national TV news story describing the causes and effects of the Bangladesh floods.			
10 Write an obituary for the artist Matisse.			
11 Write a booklet for Year 5 pupils explaining the origins of the English language.			
12 Write an evaluation of your Design and technology project.			

Creating a context for writing   10 minutes

Read the *Creating a context for writing* grid above and identify whether each task is helpful, partly helpful or unhelpful to the pupils. The more explicit the task, the more helpful it is to the pupils.

Match your thinking to some recent tasks you have set. Are there some you could have clarified?

Classroom assignment: text types   10 minutes

Think about the next writing task you are going to set. Plan to ensure that it is helpful to your pupils.

Plan to be explicit about the text type required and its key features at text, sentence and word level.

Evaluate the effect of what you did. Ask the pupils for feedback about whether it made writing easier for them.

2 Providing models for writing

The Key Stage 3 Strategy advocates a sequence for teaching writing, which will support pupils' learning. There is no suggestion that you need to work through it every time you set a writing task, but some aspects will prove useful each time, if only as a reminder to pupils. If the sequence is taught and applied at Key Stage 3, then pupils should be able to write largely independently by Key Stage 4.

Sequence for teaching writing

1   Establish clear aims.

2   Provide example(s).

3   Explore the conventions of the text.

4   Define the conventions.

5   Demonstrate how it is written.

6   Compose together.

7   Scaffold the first attempts.

8   Independent writing.

9   Draw out key learning.

Classroom assignment: text types 10 minutes

Select a text type that is essential in your subject. Use the structure below to help you decide on what the conventions might be at text, sentence and word level. You will find exemplification in the *Literacy across the curriculum* folder (DfEE 0235/2001).

Conventions

Purpose

- What is its purpose?

- Who is it for?

- How will it be used?

- What kind of writing is therefore appropriate?

Text level

- Layout

- Structure/organisation

- Sequence

Sentence level

- Viewpoint (first person, third person, etc.)

- Prevailing tense

- Active/passive voice

- Typical sentence structure and length

- Typical cohesion devices

Word level

- Stock words and phrases

- Specialised or typical vocabulary

- Elaborate/plain vocabulary choices

Writing frames

When a pupil using a writing frame was asked if he could write more in that paragraph he said 'No, because the box is too small for any more.'

Writing frames can be restrictive and result in little more than a sentence in each box. It is better to use a text to draw up the conventions and then work on sentence starters, so the frame is on the wall and in the mind rather than on paper in front of each pupil. In any case, writing frames should be withdrawn rapidly as the pupils become familiar with the text type.

Task 7

Exemplifying the sequence for teaching writing   20 minutes

Video sequence 14a comes from *Extending literacy across the curriculum* and shows a teacher using the sequence for teaching writing in a Year 7 history class.

As you watch, consider:

- how she is using the sequence for teaching writing;

- the impact of the teaching on the pupils' work.

3 Developing pupils' skills as writers

Our examination system demands that pupils demonstrate what they know, understand and can do under timed conditions, often in very brief responses. However, pupils need time to develop the skills to express that knowledge and understanding clearly and precisely. Pupils need to start developing their skills in Key Stage 3, so that they can maximise attainment at Key Stage 4.

Writing collaboratively is a good way to develop skills and confidence. Giving pupils thinking and talking time prior to writing gives time to share and refine ideas. Providing them with mini whiteboards to try out what they want to write, without committing themselves, provides further support. Teaching pupils how to plan, draft and edit is crucial to their development.

Planning and drafting is about content and structure, whereas editing is more about surface features like spelling and punctuation.

Pupils need a variety of planning formats so they can choose the one best suited to them and the task. Many of the note-taking formats in *Literacy across the curriculum*, module 9 may be useful.

Task 8

Classroom assignment: developing the sequence in your classroom   15 minutes

Now your tasks are helpful to pupils and you are clear about text types, plan to use some of the sequence for writing as part of your next task.

You could:

- join a colleague to gather some examples of the kind of text you want the pupils to write and prepare an analysis ready to use with your pupils;

- work with a colleague to prepare and model an opening or concluding paragraph to a text and then ask pupils to write the rest in pairs;

- share the writing of a paragraph or sentence with pupils and ask them to be clear about the decisions and choices they have made;

- reflect with your colleague on the successes and challenges of the activity;

- decide on what you would change or tackle next time.

Organising writing

10 minutes

A good way to encourage pupils to organise writing is to set them the task of sorting information under headings. To do this you could use the information below, which is taken from a leaflet designed to promote a school. You could photocopy the table of information and issue this to pupils. (They could cut up the table to help in sorting, if you wish.) The pupils should:

- decide on the five key points that could form paragraphs in the text. Jot those down on a sheet of A4 paper, leaving space under each heading;

- place each of the other points under one or other of the headings.

You then have both paragraph headings and the content of the paragraph to build into a complete text.

Leaflet to promote our school

aims of the school	curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4	extra-curricular, out-of-school activities
facilities	school day – example of a pupil timetable	school profile
details about homework	data about school End of Key Stage 3 tests and GCSE results and targets	quotes from recent Ofsted report
details of pupil involvement and responsibilities	school rules	links with other schools and organisations
recent and proposed projects and events, school trips	options and choices, work experience and careers	sixth-form
provision for all abilities; pupils with exceptional and special needs – challenge and support	home/school links	uniform
school values, expectations and shared understandings	parents' evenings/meetings	opportunities for parental involvement – friends of the school, parent–staff association, contractual agreements

- Material for sort activities can be laminated and stored for future use.

- If a pupil struggles with many aspects of the writing process, prioritise sentence structure above features such as spelling and punctuation.

- Encourage pupils to draft and edit using ICT; try not to use ICT for copying up.

- Writing is best improved during the process, rather than at the end through your marking.

- If you have a small group of pupils who need further support or who need to move on rapidly because they are already good writers, consider guided work where you work with them for between 5 and 20 minutes to model, share and scaffold their work. For some pupils, this might be guided speaking and listening where you share ideas and formulate oral text as a rehearsal for writing.

- If you have no need for extended text in your subject at Key Stage 3, plan how you will prepare pupils for the writing demands at Key Stage 4 in Years 7, 8 and 9. It may be that focusing on a few well-written sentences will do much to prepare pupils for what lies ahead.

- Consider using response partners, where pupils are paired to respond to each other's work as they write. You can use the defined conventions as a checklist for them to work to.

- Use a plenary to ask the class to evaluate one pupil's writing for its quality.

- Use a starter to place a piece of good writing on an OHT and ask the class to identify its qualities and then refine their own in the light of their thinking.

- Give ongoing oral and written feedback as pupils work; ensure you comment on what has been done well and why it is good as well as suggesting improvements.

- Encourage the use of dictionaries, subject-specific vocabulary and thesauri to increase variety, but make sure pupils know how to use them quickly and effectively.

Further support is available from *Assessment for learning, whole-school training materials* (DfES 0043-2004 G-3) especially module 4, Oral and written feedback and unit 12, Assessment for learning.

Improving writing

The examples of pupils' writing on the next two pages are taken from *Literacy in design and technology* (DfES 0050/2002).

Sample A

Sample A

Sample B

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Improving writing — 10 minutes

Look at the two evaluations above from a design and technology lesson. The first was done as a result of the teacher's usual method of asking questions to form a writing frame for the response. Because he was dissatisfied with the response, the teacher decided to model how to write an evaluation and ensure the pupils were familiar with the text type.

The second piece was the result.

- Compare the two pieces and consider the strengths and weaknesses of each.

- Could the approach help you and your pupils feel more satisfied with their results?

Classroom assignment: putting it all together — 10 minutes

Work with your colleague.

Plan:

- how you will introduce a writing task;

- how you will support pupils in planning and organising their work;

- how you will build in time for reflection and improvement.

After the task, take some samples of work from each class, discuss the standards of writing and how what you did contributed to any improvement over previous pieces.

Discuss any challenges and how you might overcome them together.

4 Refining sentences

A well-written sentence is key to expressing ideas with clarity. A complex sentence will express links and relationships between ideas.

'Glaciers may be melting because of global warming.'

'If the rates of warming increase, then we may not have such long skiing seasons in some parts of the world.'

'Although I liked the look of my clock, it did not work very well.'

Below is a list of connectives and the signposts they give.

Connectives as signposts

Adding	Cause and effect
and	because
also	so
as well as	therefore
moreover	thus
too	consequently

Sequencing	Qualifying
next	however
then	although
first, second, third, …	unless
finally	except
meanwhile	if
before	as long as
after	apart from
	yet

Emphasising	Illustrating
above all	for example
in particular	such as
especially	for instance
significantly	as revealed by
indeed	in the case of
notably	

Comparing	Contrasting
equally	whereas
in the same way	instead of
similarly	alternatively
likewise	otherwise
as with	unlike
like	on the other hand

As you read through the grid, reflect on which connectives link across sentences, like *however* and *moreover*, and which ones link within sentences, like *although* and *because*.

Varying sentences

Fluent writers vary the ways in which they construct their sentences. They will swap around, sometimes beginning with a subordinate clause, sometimes a main clause, sometimes other ways.

Practical tips for variety	
• Start with a verb ending in –ing:	Reaching 60 today is not a sign to sit back.
• Start with a verb ending in –ed:	Revolted by the slaughter, the aid worker …
• Start with an adverb:	Well-done chicken means that salmonella …
• Start with a preposition:	Within city limits, you will find …

Task 12

Looking at sentences   10 minutes

Get together with your colleague and look at some samples of writing from your chosen pupils. Look closely at the sentence structure and plan together to improve the fluency by teaching pupils to vary the sentence structure.

Task 13

Unit task   30 minutes

After a term, assemble with your colleague the written work from the pupils you chose (see task 2).

- Identify improvements.

- Discuss what brought about these improvements.

- Discuss any challenges that remain and plan how to solve them together.

- Present your work to the department if that is appropriate.

Summary of research

This survey of current research is taken from *Improving writing: key messages from research* from the English department training (2003) document. The key messages leaflets are all in school in the English department. Some of these would be a useful resource for you, especially those on punctuation and improving boys' writing.

Choice of teaching strategies can make a difference

In a meta-analysis of research looking at a range of studies on teaching strategies in secondary classrooms, three broad approaches to the teaching of writing were identified (Hillocks 1986):

- **presentational**: where the role of the teacher is that of setting tasks and marking outcomes;

- **process**: where the pupil controls the writing choice and writing is developed through drafts and peer-conferencing (Graves 1983; Calkins 1988);

- **environmental**: a more guided, negotiated approach where active teaching of complex strategies supports pupils towards independent use (Australian genre theorists).

The study suggests that the latter approach is two or three times more effective than the 'process' approach and four times more effective than the 'presentational' approach because:

- new forms and criteria for writing are modelled;

- enquiry and problem-solving processes are involved;

- distinct features are identified and pupils are helped to apply these in their own independent writing.

Effective teaching of writing will depend on the degree to which teachers understand the complexity of the task (Schulman 1987).

Clear, focused writing objectives support pupils

Tightly structured lessons, which establish a clear sense of purpose and direction through clearly defined achievable targets, benefit all pupils but especially boys (Frater 1998).

Writing needs to be purposeful and offer pupils a stake in the negotiation of meaningful opportunities for expressing their interests (Britton et al. 1975). This is crucial for maintaining the interest of boys. Teachers have been slow to use boys' particular knowledge of media and information technology and to link preferred writing to their preferred reading of factual 'real world' texts (Daly 1999). There is clear agreement in research on the need to integrate activities in writing around purposeful, authentic learning tasks.

The use of shared reading as a bridge to writing

Teachers need to provide good examples of texts so that pupils are able jointly to investigate and analyse the features as readers or as writers. Callaghan and Rothery (1998) suggest that there are three stages in this approach:

- **modelling**: teacher shares information about the uses and features of the text type (genre);

- **joint construction**: teacher and pupils work together to construct a new text sharing the same generic features;

- **independent construction**: pupils construct a new text in the same genre, drafting and editing in consultation with peers and the teacher.

American researchers Nystrand, Gamoran and Carbonaro (1998) found that writing achievement was positively related to the degree of coherence between reading, writing and discussion (peer response) in secondary classrooms. Research with older primary pupils suggests that teaching writing in combination with reading prompts better critical thinking about texts than when the activities are isolated.

Writing at Key Stage 3 involves learning to read from multiple sources and writing critically in response. Writers need to be able to organise more complex information and to orchestrate, control and reflect upon their writing of a wide range of fiction and non-fiction texts (Hillocks 1995).

Explicit teaching and modelling language choices

Anticipating the needs of their audience and understanding the reader/writer relationship require clarity of objectives, purpose and task. Teachers need to be clear with pupils how the audience and purpose for their piece of writing will determine the structural and linguistic choices they make as writers (Cope and Kalantzis 1993).

Australian genre theorists have shown how reading–writing links can be productive, particularly in teaching non-fiction writing. They advocate explicit teaching of how texts work in order that pupil writers can construct texts and organise their own ideas for particular purposes and audiences effectively (Halliday 1985).

Exploration of texts can help writers access a range of 'discourses of power', that is ways of writing used by people to organise and influence the world around them (Martin 1989). Many aspects of written information texts can be explored directly with pupils to create awareness of the different language resources that serve different purposes (Christie 1998, Derewianka 1990, Hasan and Martin 1989, Kress 1982).

Evidence shows that teachers can support pupils in managing complexity by modelling the power of sentence-combining activities (Shaughnessy 1979). Modelling is more than 'demonstrating' writing because it involves talking pupils through the thinking and decision-making processes used when writers write. The teacher takes the role as 'expert' (Vygotsky 1980). The use of metacognition and meta-language are important factors. Pupils need a supportive writing environment but benefit from seeing and experiencing the 'struggles' that are part of developing the writing skills (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1982, 1987).

Guided writing

Guided writing offers small-group teaching opportunities to support writers in making valuable connections between the text-, sentence- and word-level decisions required to shape texts with particular criteria in mind. Teachers can clarify the cognitive processes used when pupils are planning and revising, before, during or after writing parts of a text. The aim is to develop better-focused and more fluent writing with the support and feedback of teacher and peers (Scardamalia et al. 1981).

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is an effective process by which the teacher organises learning that is challenging to pupils in such a way as to assist them to carry out the new task successfully (Wood et al. 1976). It is a complex process and involves:

- activating and maintaining the learner's interest;

- reducing the number of choices available;

- keeping the pupils on-task;

- highlighting critical aspects;

- controlling frustration;

- demonstrating the process to pupils.

Scaffolding has a role in moving pupils to independent use of new strategies by supporting them as co-constructors of knowledge and co-users of more expert strategies than those they can control independently (Palincsar 1986). Writing frames are just one example of scaffolds, but their misuse has underlined the complexities in the process of pupils becoming sufficiently independent to manage without the 'expert facilitator' (Lewis and Wray 2000).

Feedback and revision

Since writing involves the integration of several processes, re-reading to revise is important (Norwood, Hayes and Flower 1980). Chanquoy (2001) shows the positive effect of returning to writing after the event. The time delay seems to help, but the techniques for revising need to be explicitly taught, that is modelled by the teacher. Glynn et al. (1989), behavioural psychologists researching in New Zealand classrooms, found considerable evidence that positive oral feedback has an impact on both motivation and the amount written. This was found to be more significant when errors were selectively targeted and when pupils were involved in error correction and praised for this. The research suggests that teachers' comments should be organisational, encouraging, constructive, challenging and push pupils' thinking. The work of Black and Wiliam (1998) and Black et al. (2002) looks at formative assessment and its relationship to raising standards in pupils' learning. They comment that effective feedback needs to make explicit to pupils what is involved in producing high-quality writing and what steps are needed for improvement. They suggest that pupils should be actively engaged in the thinking and discussion involved.

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Next steps

This unit has explored an aspect of teaching and learning. You may wish to develop your ideas further, to consolidate, apply ideas in different contexts or explore an aspect in more depth and innovate.

Reflect

What have been the key learning points for you?

What has been the impact on pupils?

Here are some suggestions as to how you may develop practice further:

- Invite your pupils to evaluate the approaches used and give you feedback about the successes and challenges. Identify any approaches that prove particularly productive and discuss these with your department. Are there any that the whole department could focus on?

- Discuss writing with other teachers outside your department and find others who need the same text types in their subjects. Plan some common approaches and see if you can teach the text types at the same time so pupils learn to deploy their skills across the curriculum. Evaluate the impact of this joint approach after a few weeks. What has worked well?

- Look at the writing demands of GCSE in your subject. Which are the particularly difficult aspects where many stumble? How could you plan to prepare your pupils for them through Key Stage 3?

- Investigate how you might use peer assessment to improve pupils' writing. You will need to generate a set of criteria for each text type. Try adapting the materials in this unit. Unit 12 Assessment for learning may help. There are some examples of peer assessment in video sequences 12f, g, h and i. What extra dimension does this add to supporting writing?

For further reading the following publication is recommended:

- Wray, D. and Lewis, M. (1996) *Extending literacy, children reading and writing non-fiction.* Routledge. ISBN: 0415128293.

Setting future targets

Having considered your next steps, you may wish to set yourself some personal targets to support your own continuing professional development. You could use these ideas to inform your performance management discussion.

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Setting your targets

40 minutes

When setting targets for the future you may want to discuss the possibilities with a colleague or your line manager.

Whatever you decide to do, you will need to consider the following.

- What are your objectives for the next year?

- What are the expected outcomes in terms of pupils' achievements?

- What strategies will you employ to achieve these outcomes?

- How will you track progress over the year?

- How will you know whether you have been successful or not?

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