

## Contents

1	Introduction: what success has to teach us	1
2	What writing involves and how we go about it	2
3	Children becoming writers: what they bring to school	5
4	Children becoming writers: what they have to learn in school	8
5	Lessons from studies of effective schools and effective classrooms	15
6	Key classroom practices that promote development in writing	19
7	Assessment	30
8	Conclusion	31
	References	32

UKLA

# Teaching Writing: *What the evidence says*

## **Introduction: what success has to teach us**

In England our schools are more closely regulated than ever before. A detailed National Curriculum combined with a regime of inspection (with punitive sanctions) aimed at ensuring methodological conformity is intended to raise Standards. To many people not immediately engaged with the classroom, the way to do this seems obvious. Focus heavily on the basics, such as spelling and punctuation. Apply rigour, in the form of grammar teaching. Test frequently. But if we look at the research evidence, as we will see, the answers are rather different.

Writing is about constructing and encoding meaning. It is therefore a more complex and demanding process than reading and consequently harder to learn. One researcher claims that engaging in a writing task is as mentally demanding as playing chess. (Kellogg, 2008). Eliot is not alone in his experience of “the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings” (Eliot, 1941, part II lines 20-21).

There are a number of primary schools in the UK and elsewhere where children enjoy writing, do so with ease and verve, and score well on tests. Yet many other children are not enthusiastic and writing scores on England’s SAT tests have been consistently lower than scores for reading. If we are to improve national standards in writing, we need to learn from the success stories. This booklet aims to help readers to do this.

The research cited here comes from the English-speaking world, primarily from the UK, the US, Australia and New Zealand. Some of our knowledge comes from intervention studies, some from surveys (including Ofsted surveys) and some from observational studies. In recent years, studies of teacher and school effectiveness have made an important contribution, and so we devote a substantial section of this paper to insights from this work. We recognise the value of all these research paradigms as sources of information about how children go about the business of writing, how they can best be helped to learn to write – and to become writers, exploiting the rich possibilities that written text has to offer for enlarging their lives.

## 2 What writing is and how we go about it

### 2.1 What writing involves

If we are to teach our children to write most effectively, we need to be fully aware of what writing is and what it can do. The act of writing is about constructing what the writer wants to say, in a visual form, using the communicative tools and practices available (Kress, 1997). So learning to write is more than the mastery of the range of technical skills and transcriptional conventions that determine how words should be set down on the page or screen. Composition - the construction of meaning through words - is central. We should emphasise at this point that the evidence on the teaching that works best suggests that learning to write is most effectively achieved through approaches that balance communicative purpose and technical skills (Knapp *et al.*, 1995; Medwell *et al.*, 1998; Louden *et al.*, 2005).

In almost any piece of writing, from a substantial novel to a note on the kitchen table, a writer has to bring together:

- a sense of what has to be communicated - a purpose for writing;
- a knowledge of who might read the text and how to speak to them without the support of a shared context - a sense of audience;
- a familiarity with the explicit language of written text and its lexical, grammatical and presentational forms;
- an awareness of different types of writing, both paper-based and digital, and which might best fit the purpose and audience;
- a knowledge of punctuation and spelling;
- control of handwriting or digital technology;
- a readiness to review the writing after the first draft, checking for sense, for fitness for purpose and audience, and for technical accuracy.

Cremin and Myhill (2011) state that writing requires us to:

*Shape our thoughts into words, frame those words into sentences and texts which are appropriate for our intended audience and purpose, and pay attention to shaping letters, spelling words, punctuating sentences and organizing the whole text.* (Cremin and Myhill, 2011, p.10)

## **2.2 What writing can do**

However, writing is not just one, undifferentiated kind of activity: different purposes require different kinds of writing.

The writer can use writing to:

- record events, through log books, diaries etc.;
- work out ideas and shape emerging thoughts, through jottings, drawings and notes and wikis;
- order and extend thinking, as in planning for action or developing an argument;
- reflect on experiences, ideas or learning, through journals, logs and diaries;
- create aesthetically satisfying works, such as stories, poems and plays;
- communicate with others, both known and unknown, in a range of formal and informal ways, through texting, e-mails, letters, work reports etc.

These purposes are not all mutually exclusive: some writing may be for the writer alone, but most writing has a communicative function, an audience in mind. In addition, engaging in the act of writing builds a cultural identity for the writer, an authorial persona. To write is to extend one's relationship with the world and one's role in it.

## **2.3 The changing nature of text**

Writing these days is not just about words alone: in the world outside school the nature of texts has changed dramatically in the last few decades. Advances in digital technology have opened out possibilities, allowing texts to have a much stronger visual component with the added possibility of sound and video. Electronic texts of all sorts can be copied, modified and forwarded in ways that make them much less static than conventional texts and blur the boundaries between reading and writing. Today, text composition is as much about design as it is about verbal choice (Bearne, 2005; Kress, 2008).

## **2.4 Going about a piece of writing**

So how do we go about this complex task? Over 30 years ago, Hayes and Flower (1980) proposed that the experienced writer engages in three different kinds of activity: planning, creating text and reviewing. In their view, this

is not a simple three-stage sequence, but a process in which the writer weaves back and forth between all three activities in the course of writing a single text.

For children learning to write, any piece of writing involves, of course, a further kind of activity, in that spelling, punctuation and handwriting - skills that experienced writers use almost automatically - require conscious attention, at least in the early years of primary school. So to become independent writers, children have to learn to orchestrate many different kinds of skill, knowledge and understanding, bringing them into harmony to create a satisfying and effective text.

The different functions of writing listed above have an importance for children learning to write as well as for experienced writers. Writing as an instrument for shaping thought has a particular significance. Building on the work of Hayes and Flower cited above, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982), see that to become effective writers, children not only have to learn to write for known and unknown readers, they also need to move from 'knowledge-telling' to 'knowledge-transforming'. In short, children need to learn to exploit the opportunity offered by writing to develop their thinking and understanding, through using the act of writing to order, explore, extend, clarify and revise their view of the world and their place in it. This concern is now widely shared: Neuman and Roskos (1997) argue that children need to learn not only the technical skills of reading and writing but also how to use these tools to develop their thinking and reasoning.

In addition, we need to be aware that teaching children to write is a social and cultural act. Cremin and Myhill (2011) write:

*When we write we are participating in a social practice that is shaped by social and historical understandings of what writing is and what texts should do. When we teach children to write, we teach them what is valued in our culture.* (Cremin and Myhill, 2011, p. 11)

What follows is based on this view of writing as a cognitive, social and cultural act, focused on the making of meaning, much more than the sum of its technical parts.