Modelling
EXCITING
Writing
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WRITING AND SPELLING, PUNCTUATION AND GRAMMAR

TEACHERS’ STANDARDS

This chapter will help you with the following Teachers’ Standard:

3. Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge:
   • have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject(s) and curriculum areas, foster and maintain pupils’ interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings;
   • demonstrate a critical understanding of developments in the subject and curriculum areas, and promote the value of scholarship;
   • demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of Standard English, whatever the teacher’s specialist subject.

KEY QUESTIONS

• How can spelling, punctuation and grammar be an integral part of creative writing?
• Can SPaG motivate and inspire children to write?
• How can we embed SPaG development in effective writing development?
• How can we maintain high-quality writing when teaching children about SPaG?
Introduction

Children are assessed on spelling, punctuation and grammar throughout their primary years. The SATs for Year 6 featured heavily on the news in recent years, with parents, teachers and pupils all voicing their opinions about the assessments. Some teachers agreed with the tests and their level of difficulty, others did not.

Professor Richard Hudson, who was the main advisor on creating the SATs papers, explained why he supported the SPaG tests by stating:

*I am convinced that children should understand something about how their language works (KAL – knowledge about language), and should be able to talk about simple grammatical patterns both in English and in foreign languages; so, they should learn something about phonology, spelling patterns, vocabulary and grammar.*

Hudson, 2015

However, authors and children’s laureates Michael Rosen and Michael Morpurgo disagree with the tests completely. Rosen criticised the prescriptive nature of ‘right answers’ in tests when language is something he describes as ‘ever changing and academics cannot agree on whether there is a subjunctive in English’ (2015). Morpurgo (2017) agrees and adds, ‘when it comes to creativity, I think SATs sit like a dark spider all over creativity in the classroom’ (2017).

Indeed, the authors of the SPaG section of the National Curriculum have expressed serious doubts about both the curriculum and the tests. The section below comprises extracts from a *Guardian Education* article (Mansell, 2017)

*Guardian: 9 May 2017*

Now Richard Hudson, the academic who says he bears most responsibility for introducing the fronted adverbial, has said the process through which the national curriculum was changed under Michael Gove, the former education secretary, was ‘chaotic’. He admits it was not based on good research evidence and says he feels many teachers are not equipped to teach it.

Hudson’s comments mean that all four of an expert panel that advised the government on placing greater emphasis on traditional grammar in its primary curriculum now have serious reservations about either the tests, or the curriculum development process.

…but he does admit there was ‘chaos’ in the process of developing what is a controversial curriculum. ‘To give you an idea of how chaotic things were, when [the curriculum panel] was originally put together, we had about four meetings and were supposed to be devising a grammar curriculum to cover the whole of compulsory education: primary and secondary.

‘We started off with the primary curriculum, which we were a bit unconfident about as none of us had much experience of primary education [Myhill had, in fact, done some research into grammar in primary schools], and were looking forward to getting stuck into the real thing: secondary.

‘Then the DfE pulled the plug by saying: “We are not going to do any secondary curriculum.” So what was published [the primary curriculum] was meant to be about building the foundations for the real thing. But that’s all there is.’

In this chapter we argue that, whatever one’s opinion on the tests themselves, an understanding of spelling, punctuation and grammar is essential for children and adults. It is part
of every subject taught in the primary classroom. We will show how meaningful and engaging activities can be used to help children to learn about their language in context. While there may be questions about the content of the curriculum and the tests associated with it, we maintain that it is helpful to share a common vocabulary about language with pupils and we emphasise that this is generally best acquired through reading and writing rather than in discrete grammar lessons. Interestingly, Deborah Myhill, whose work is cited in the research focus below, was one of the four authors of the SPaG curriculum.

**FOCUS ON RESEARCH:**

Myhill, Lines and Watson (2011) examined ways of developing children’s writing and discovered that actively engaging children with grammar through writing was more effective than teaching grammar as a separate topic. They found that children were less likely to see the purpose of grammatical knowledge when it was taught out of the context of actual writing; they asserted that children can become more aware to the *infinite possibilities* of the English language through studying how language works, and that this can enable them to evaluate others’ language use. They suggest that:

> a writing curriculum which draws attention to the grammar of writing in an embedded and purposeful way at relevant points in the learning is a more positive way forward. In this way, young writers are introduced to what we have called ‘a repertoire of infinite possibilities’, explicitly showing them how different ways of shaping sentences or texts, and ... different choices of words can generate different possibilities for meaning-making.

Myhill et al., 2012:3

Frequently, when we read something that is grammatically incorrect, such as ‘the red, big bus’, we know that something is wrong. We know that it should read ‘the big, red bus’, but often we cannot explain why it is grammatically incorrect. We just know. This is because if we read often we become more aware of grammatical structures, and spotting grammatical errors becomes instinctive. Children can recognise errors in texts when they are fluent readers, exposed frequently to the correct spelling, punctuation and grammar.

The reason that the ‘red, big bus’ in incorrect is because adjectives must follow a particular order. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* (2018), if there are multiple adjectives before a noun then the order is: opinion, size, physical quality, shape, age, colour, origin, material, type and purpose. This means that size goes before colour, so ‘the red, big bus’ becomes ‘the big, red bus’. This also means that we would never have ‘green, ancient, huge dragons’. But we could have ‘huge, ancient, green dragons’.

Knowing grammatical rules is important and ways of teaching and learning these rules in creative ways will be explored throughout this chapter. But by encouraging children to read, we reinforce instinctive knowledge of grammar and also spelling and punctuation. The more children read, the more they are exposed to SPaG and the easier it is to teach and learn about it.
Modelling writing and developing knowledge about language

Look at the dialogue below and consider how the Year 4 teacher is engaging children in the writing process while developing their knowledge about language.

Teacher (indicating two sentences on the board) Right, there’s my story opening (reads):
Sarah was lying in bed. She heard a loud noise. It seemed to be coming from just outside her bedroom window.
Is everybody happy with that? Would you want to read the rest of the story if you read that at the beginning of a book? Could I improve it at all?

Jack Well, I think it ought to be more dramatic, like it could start with the noise and Sarah waking up.

Lucy Yeah, you could have a word like crash or thud first.

Adam Yeah, you know, one of those words that sounds like the noise.

Teacher Great idea. We could use an onomatopoeic word. Can anyone suggest one? (He writes on the board as children suggest crunch, crackle, splat, bong, crash and thwack.)

Teacher OK, we’ve got some ideas for words to start the story; can you improve my writing a bit more?

Lily Well, you could make it just one sentence like: Crash: Sarah was woken by a loud sound from just outside her bedroom window.

Teacher Excellent. I like the way you’ve added an adjective like loud.

Faith You could add an adverb like suddenly to show how she was woken.

Teacher Brilliant ideas. Right, before I finalise my story opening I need everyone’s help. Can you work in pairs and write your own version of the story opening? Make sure you include at least one adverb and adjective so that we get a picture of what was happening.

The teacher has developed a dialogue with the class and has subjected his deliberately rather dull writing to their critical scrutiny. He has welcomed their ideas and has used some linguistic terminology in context. This has been reinforced as he has invited the children’s ideas. There is a gradual shift of responsibility from the teacher modelling writing to the children giving ideas and then writing independently. The next stage could be for the children to read some of their story openings and for the teacher to edit and revise his, reading and re-reading as he does so and perhaps thinking aloud to model the writing process. For example, I think it might sound better if I shifted the adverbial to the beginning of the sentence or What if I put in something about how Sarah felt when she was woken by the noise? Can anyone suggest any adjectives which might describe that?

Vygotsky asserted: ‘What the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow’ (Vygotsky, 1986: 188). The teacher in the example above is enabling children to see the writing process in action and to contribute to it, while developing their potential to work independently. Vygotsky referred to this as the zone of proximal development: the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978: 86).
This approach might be termed *interactive writing* (Roth and Guinee, 2011) and involves teacher and pupils working together ‘to construct a meaningful text while discussing the details of the writing process’ (ibid.: 333). Crucially, Roth and Guinee argue that ‘The instruction does not follow a specified sequence but evolves from the teacher’s understanding of the students’ strengths and needs’ (ibid.: 335). This approach therefore makes demands upon the teacher, who needs to be confident about her or his subject knowledge and prepared occasionally to admit to ignorance. This can bring children into a collective approach to learning when, for instance, the teacher is unsure about a spelling and asks people to look it up in a dictionary or discuss what spellings might be possible.

Key features of this type of modelling include:

- *considering audience*: keeping the intended readership at the forefront of one’s thinking and the children’s, so that an appropriate style and language use is discussed and referred to regularly;
- *articulating the process of writing*: showing that real writers draft, edit and revise and make mistakes and have strategies for correcting them;
- *demonstrating the application of spelling and grammar rules*: this can include making use of appropriate terminology and making deliberate mistakes, for example in spelling, punctuation and subject–verb agreement;
- *re-reading regularly*: checking that writing is accurate, language and sentence structure is varied, and vocabulary interesting, varied and accessible.

In the case studies which follow, note how teachers make use of some of these strategies to develop children’s writing and their knowledge about language.

**FOCUS ON RESEARCH:**

Higgins (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of research on teaching literacy and drew some interesting conclusions about the teaching of writing:

- evidence (Graham et al., 2012) indicates it is important to expose pupils to a *variety of forms of writing* and to practise these so that they learn to write for a variety of purposes and master different genres of writing (e.g. description, narration, persuasion or argumentation, information and explanatory texts);
- seeing examples of good writing in these different forms and being given positive feedback when they develop key features is essential;
- teach explicit strategies. For example, in descriptive writing one approach which has been shown to be effective is to link written descriptions with the senses: *What did you see? How did it look? What sounds did you hear? What did you touch? How did it feel? What could you smell? What did you taste?*
Formal and informal writing

Teaching children to write in a variety of styles can be challenging. Children need to consider what it is that they are writing, who it is for, what the purpose of the writing is and whether it is formal or informal, depending on the audience. This is known as GAPS: genre, audience, purpose and style.

The more children are exposed to a variety of texts, the more they begin to identify these changes in style. For example, when they talk to their friends, children use informal language, but when they are expected to write a non-chronological report using topic-related language this must be formal language. Making this shift can be challenging for children.

In order to recognise the difference between formal and informal language, we can use familiar texts to assist. In the case study below, the teacher has been sharing The Gruffalo with her Reception class. The rhythm and the repetition of the book had helped the class to memorise the text almost completely. She could point to the words and the class could recite the text on every page. It is written in formal language and, as it is such a familiar text to the children in the case study, it could be used to compare the difference between formal and informal language.

CASE STUDY

RECEPTION CLASS ORALLY RETELLING THE GRUFFALO IN AN INFORMAL STYLE

Nicola, a Reception teacher in the North East of England, had finished reading The Gruffalo by Julia Donaldson to her class. They had read it several times previously and the class joined in with the reading. She then showed the class another copy of the book but explained that it had been written differently. This was The Gruffalo in Scots retold by James Robertson. It begins:

*A moose took a dauner through the deep, mirk widd. A tod saw the moose and the moose looked guid.*

*Whaur are ye aff tae, wee broon moose? Will ye no hae yer denner in ma deep-doon hoose?*

*That’s awfie kind o ye, Tod, but I’ll no –I’m gonnae hae ma denner wi a gruffalo.*

The children laughed and said that the words were wrong. Nicola explained that it had been written in the way that some people from Scotland spoke. She went on to say that we all speak differently depending on where we come from. The class were told that this was called dialect and accent.

She then asked the class the different ways in which they have heard people say ‘hello’. The answers ranged from ‘hiya’ to ‘ey up’ to ‘all right’ to ‘hi’. Nicola went on to model
rewriting *The Gruffalo* in North East dialect. The children gave her suggestions and she acted as scribe. She wrote:

*A mouse ganned down the dene. A fox saw the mouse and he looked all right.*

*Where you ganning, little, brown mouse? Do you want some bait back at mine?*

*That’s dead nice an tha, fox, but no – I’m gonna have me bait with a Gruffalo.*

The children thought it was very funny to write in this way. Nicola asked them why it was so funny and they told her that books don’t sound like that. She then asked the children to retell an eight-part, pictorial storyboard of *The Gruffalo* in talk partners, but to do it in the same way that she had modelled. The children then took the storyboards and orally retold the story using informal, local dialect. Nicola then gave the children photocopied sheets with characters from *The Gruffalo*. They had empty speech bubbles for the children to insert the words the characters said.

The more able wrote in sentences, the middle ability wrote words and phrases, and the lower-ability children used their phonics knowledge to create sound blends with support.

The case study illustrates how children can be helped to understand differences in regional dialect. It also helped the children to understand that when we talk to our friends we use a different form of language from when we write. It was a lesson that formed the beginning of a comprehension of the difference between formal and informal writing. *The Gruffalo in Scots* is one of many Scottish dialect books. Others include: *The Gruffalo’s Wean*, *There was a Wee Lassie Who Swallowed a Midgie* and *Geordie’s Mingin’ Medicine*.

When children grasp the concept of the difference between formal and informal writing, even in the early years, it helps them to check for grammatical errors in their own writing. They begin to realise that sentences such as ‘He was dead frightened’ or ‘She learned the class lots about butterflies’ are not grammatically correct. By looking at the ways in which we adapt our language for our audience when speaking, we can help children to see the way we change from formal to informal language. Once this has been understood, this adaptation of language can be seen in our writing too.

**Activity 1  Correcting SPaG**

Show a KS1 or lower KS2 class the animation ‘Usain Bolt – The Boy Who Could Fly’ from Youtube or the Literacy Shed.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtujkNnCYCc

https://www.literacyshed.com/usain.html

*(Continued)*
In the beginning, Usain’s mother says, ‘You’re gonna be late!’ Usain then runs off chanting to himself, ‘Not gonna be late. Not gonna be late. Not gonna be late.’

- Could the children change this informal speech into formal language?
- What other sentences or phrases could the children change?
- What other texts or animations contain informal language? How could these be used to teach the difference between formal and informal writing?

Tell the children that changing writing from one form to another is like magic. Tell them that they are going to practise this magic. They will become witches and wizards, but instead of using wands, they are going to use pens. Give them phrases and sentences such as ‘I wuv you’, ‘I dunno’ or ‘Whatcha gonna learn us?’ and ask them to change them to grammatically correct phrases and sentences.

The children are seeing the magic of language. They are seeing that making a small change can make a big difference to words. In this example, they are transforming sentences from the incorrect to the correct: from the informal to the formal.

- What other incorrect grammar do you hear regularly in the classroom?
- How can you use this activity or similar ones to correct this grammar?
- What displays in the classroom might help to fix grammatical errors? Could you incorporate the witch, wizard or magical theme to this display?

**FOCUS ON RESEARCH**

Wyse and Torgerson (2017: 1043) examined studies on effective teaching and learning of grammar and concluded:

> supporting primary/elementary pupils’ grammar is most likely to require teachers intervening during the writing process, and interacting to discuss the use of grammar in relation to the overall purpose of the writing task and the purpose of the writing. The necessity to use technical terms, such as subordinate clause or subjunctive with pupils, remains a question open to research, but it is doubtful that attention to such terms is beneficial. It is probable that adopting everyday language to discuss improvements in the use of grammar in writing will be more beneficial. Small-group and whole-class teaching that includes a focus on the actual use of grammar in real examples of writing (including professionally produced pieces, realistic examples produced by teachers including ‘think aloud’ live drafting of text and drafts of pupils’ writing) may also be more effective.
Chain writing

Chain writing is an activity which can help pupils to develop their sentence writing skills. The sentences are very structured and the activity is teacher-led, but it can lead to independent and complex sentence writing. For example, ask the children to write the word ‘the’ followed by two adjectives to describe a dragon, mermaid or fairy; then add the correct noun, followed by the word ‘was’; then add a verb, an adverb and finally a preposition followed by ‘the’ and another noun. This gives children the experience to create their own sentences in a structured way and increases confidence to go on to create independent writing. They might create sentences such as:

The huge, scary dragon was flying rapidly in the sky.
The beautiful, swift mermaid was swimming majestically in the ocean.
The magical, tiny fairy was floating happily in the forest.

Once children are confident with this method of chain writing, they can independently add extra adjectives and adverbs and figurative language devices such as similes or alliteration throughout the sentence. So, ‘The huge, scary dragon was flying rapidly in the sky’ might become ‘The huge, scary dragon was flying like a rocket rapidly in the cold, blue sky’.

As well as being part of formal lessons, chain writing can also be an engaging and informal activity. It can be a perfect ten-minute morning task, before registration is taken or as an activity to complete as a warm up to a literacy lesson. The children work with partners, taking turns to add words or phrases. They might use a strip of paper each to write on and fold, swapping their papers on each turn. The person who goes first starts by adding a boy’s name to the top of a strip of paper, then they add the word ‘met’ and swap papers with their partner. They then write a girl’s name and swap. A preposition is then added, remembering that each time a new word or phrase is written the paper is folded over. The pair swap again and write ‘he wore’ and add some clothing and do the same for ‘she wore’. After swapping, they write ‘he said’ and write speech between inverted commas. Another swap and the children write ‘she said’ then more speech between inverted commas. There is then one final swap and the children write ‘they then’ and finish with a last event.

They can then unfold their papers and read others’ nonsense narratives.

An example could be: Zac Efron met Katy Perry at the bus station. He wore pink leggings. She wore a baseball cap backwards. He said, ‘I like cheese.’ She said, ‘My unicorn has run away.’ They then had a party.

Making writing fun, but still teaching the skills to enhance knowledge of SPaG, is important for every classroom. An example of this can be seen in the case study below.

CASE STUDY

YEAR 1 CLASS DEVELOPING DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Liam was teaching his Year 1 class how to add more detail to their descriptions. The class had been describing landscapes and focusing on adjectives. Liam showed images on an (Continued)
interactive whiteboard. He then wrote a word bank of adjectives that the children suggested for each new setting. There was a tropical beach scene, a dark cave, an icy landscape, a dense forest, a coral reef.

The class had been previously studying nouns and verbs. He reviewed these grammatical terms and modelled short sentences that included nouns, verbs and new adjectives, using the settings as stimulus. He wrote short sentences such as 'The hot beach had swaying trees.' and 'The spooky cave had dripping rocks.' The children then identified the nouns, verbs and adjectives in each sentence.

The class then collected whiteboards and pens and returned to the carpet. Liam asked them to write 'The' on their board using a capital letter to show that this was the beginning of their sentence. They were then asked to imagine their own setting or one of the places displayed on the board. They were asked to add an adjective. The less able used phonics cards to help them sound out their words. The children then added the word 'had' and were asked to think of verbs and nouns to finish their sentences like the ones he had modelled. Liam offered several suggestions and wrote these on the board.

After adding a full stop, the children shared their sentences with each other.

The class then went to their desks. Liam supported the less able, while the class wrote their whiteboard sentences into their books. If they completed these, the children were to independently write more sentences for their chosen setting or for new ones. The sentences were shared, first with talk partners and then volunteers read to the class as a plenary.

The case study shows that by giving the children structure in their sentences they can use these taught skills to move towards more independent writing. As children develop confidence in using nouns, verbs and adjectives correctly in their writing, they can begin to add other word types such as adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions. The terms for each word type become fully understood through practice and repetition.

**ACTIVITY 2**

As teachers, our constant challenge is to help children move away from heavily modelled, scaffolded writing to independent, confident writing. The basic sentence-making, as in the case study above, is a good first step, but the next step is to move towards richer descriptive language.

Show the children some colour paint charts that are available from DIY stores, Pinterest or online. Ask them to match different flowers to different themed colour charts.
For example, which shade of blue does the bluebell best match? Is it royal blue, ocean blue, midnight blue or one of the others? Which shade of yellow does the daffodil best match? Is it sunbeam yellow, corn yellow, golden yellow or one of the others? Which shade of red does the poppy best match? Is it cherry red, crimson red, candy red or one of the others? This kind of colour description really enhances basic sentences into much richer language. ‘The hot beach had swaying trees’ becomes ‘The hot beach with lemon zest sand had swaying, spinach green trees.’

• What can be used instead of flowers?
• How can adverbs extend this type of sentence?
• What else can be used to enhance description other than colour?

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

GRAMMATICAL TERMINOLOGY

Horton and Bingle (2014: 17) argue that terminology should be introduced when children are exploring and using language:

You would not teach children to swim without introducing terms such as breast stroke, front crawl and sculling in order to communicate precise meaning and it is more than likely that you would do this whilst swimming. It is no different from teaching children about language: terms such as adverbial, subordinate clause and collective noun can all be used effectively whilst engaged in a writing activity. The use of a metalanguage will give children the tools with which to discuss choices and manipulate language confidently and powerfully.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have considered how spelling, punctuation and grammar can be taught and learned effectively and have examined strategies which enable teachers to develop children’s subject knowledge in conjunction with their writing. We have cited research which suggests that this is the most effective way for children to understand the terminology and concepts associated with SPaG, while seeing them in context. We would argue that this approach is more likely to lead to long-term knowledge and understanding, especially as it enables children to use grammatical terminology in real writing situations, often involving teacher modelling.
A typical reaction to grammatical terminology from trainee teachers who did not learn it in their schooldays is to maintain that they have managed to succeed educationally, and write well, without ever using terms like fronted adverbial or subordinate clause, so why is it necessary for them to learn these terms now and then teach them to children? Of course, the pragmatic answer is that, as teachers, they will be judged by the success of their pupils in tests and, currently, SPaG is tested annually.

A better answer might be to draw a parallel between learning grammar and learning a skill such as driving. Most people seem to regard themselves as good drivers, but how many could lift the bonnet of their car and identify various parts of the engine? A little knowledge and some terminology is certainly helpful when it comes to checking oil using a dipstick, topping up the screenwash container, and attaching high tension leads to battery terminals when the car won’t start. Without some basic terminology, motorists have to pay mechanics to perform simple tasks which they could easily do themselves after looking at a simple manual.

Think back to your driving lessons. The instructor used terms like gearstick, clutch, brake, accelerator and indicator rather than describing the items by the actions they performed (better a steering wheel than ‘the round thing in front of you that you turn when you want to change direction’). A basic knowledge of grammatical terminology provides us with the vocabulary to understand why something is incorrect and to explain this to others. It enables us to discuss our reading and writing using a common vocabulary, and it also prepares us for learning other languages. How much more useful and precise it is to understand and use a term like adjective rather than referring to ‘describing words which describe things’!

Further reading

For guidance on teaching grammar, spelling and punctuation, see the following:

Recommended websites

Colour chart images – https://www.pinterest.co.uk search Colour charts.

References


