Inspiring Writing in Primary Schools
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An Idea

SAGE LearningMatters
Introduction

*Writing is among the greatest inventions, perhaps the greatest invention, since it made history possible.*

(Robinson, 2009:7)

The most fascinating thing in the history of writing is that, although it has been a tool used for over 6,000 years, it is only in the last 150 years that writing has been a skill within reach of most of the population. The first writing systems were based on pictures and hieroglyphs before they moved into alphabets and syllabic structures that matched sounds and syllables with corresponding letters and shapes. Writing also originally concerned money, with a primary function to record financial transactions, so it feels rather disappointing that its roots are not more connected with creativity or self-discovery. Some of its other functions included predicting the future or the setting down in writing of laws and decrees, for which archaeologists and historians are grateful, as this was the key to understanding early writing systems. It was the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in the early nineteenth century that led to a modern understanding and subsequent translation of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, a system far more sophisticated and complex than merely pictures representing words or ideas. The Stone was written by a group of priests in three languages: Greek (the language of the rulers), hieroglyphic (used for official Egyptian documents) and demotic (the common script of the day) and it listed all the good things that the pharaoh Ptolemy V had achieved for the people. The fact that it was written in three languages is a testament to the power of text – by
ensuring as wide an audience as possible would allow for as many people as possible to read the good words of the priests and the good deeds of the pharaoh.

It took many more centuries for writing to travel to Europe and even longer for the invention of paper to revolutionise people’s access to writing. In the 1870s, when education in England became government-financed, children were taught to read and write. Together with the Industrial Revolution, this led to writing becoming more widespread. Prior to this, while some of the population could be considered ‘literate’, the definition at the time meant only being able to read and comprehend, with most available reading material centring on biblical scriptures. Writing also belonged to those in the privileged classes, as it was they who had access to the necessary tools, like pens and paper. It was earlier, back in the fifteenth century, that Johannes Gutenberg invented interchangeable, reusable print, leading to the drop in prices of printed materials, such as books and newspapers. The printing press was also responsible for some of the problems with our English writing system. A Flemish printer working for William Caxton (who brought the printing press to England and is credited with standardising the English language) decided that ‘ghost’ should have an ‘h’, as that was how it was spelled in his language. David Crystal (2013) argues that knowing these stories behind our often incomprehensible spelling system makes the language come alive – the added benefit is to make awkward spellings easier to remember.

Fast forward five centuries, and advancements in technology mean that whether through our text messages, status updates, blogs or tweets, being able to write means being able to participate. These foundations are laid in classrooms up and down the country, where the inspiration for a positive relationship with writing can be sparked. Therefore, this book aims to demonstrate how writing can be exciting, whilst still meeting the requirements of government policy and national curriculum statements. It will also stress the importance of confident and skilful teachers with excellent subject knowledge for English, providing children with real reasons for writing, which in turn will enable them to become enthusiastic and developing young writers. Some of the ideas in the book will be familiar, and this is deliberate. The book aims to show how the exemplar activities can be adapted and refined rather than through the presentation of a set of stand-alone sessions. Most importantly, this is a book about children as writers: examples of children’s writing will be used throughout to exemplify or illustrate points of interest. As is appropriate, all the young authors gave permission for their work to be used and, therefore, their writing is not to be judged or assessed, rather it provides a picture of what is possible.

**Early writers**

From an early age, children want to write. They try their hardest to let the grown-ups know that their print carries meaning until, finally, we can decode their messages. Children in Reception classes role-play writing and use what they learn in school to transform
home-writing experiences. Here, three-year-old Jonas demonstrates his new-found writing ability and declares to his mum that he has ‘written’ his name.

![Figure 1.1 Jonas’s map](image1)

At first, your eyes might be drawn more to the map that illustrates the journey of the pencil around the page. However, look at the top left-hand corner and you can just make out some letters; there’s an attempt at a ‘J’, certainly an ‘O’ and maybe at the end you can see a sideways ‘N’.

![Figure 1.2 Jonas’s name](image2)

Jonas is demonstrating what Marie Clay (2000) would describe as an understanding of concepts about print, in that he is writing from left to right, each individual letter is clearly...
demarcated and there is an attempt at a capital letter. Most importantly, just as the example you see below, he understands that print carries meaning.

These very young children are participating in writing activities, both at school and in the home, which allows them to borrow and revise their early mark making and whilst these initial experiences may have been shaped by the adults or copied from siblings, it is the children themselves who contribute to the maintenance and transformation of these practices (Gazkins et al., 1992, as cited in Dyson, 2009).

**TA DAH!**

For example, in her homework, four-year-old Maisha demonstrates her difficulty in writing the word ‘chicken’ on a worksheet – all too familiar to Reception class teachers.

*Figure 1.3 Chicken worksheet*
However, two weeks later, and at home, Maisha writes the sentence *Chickens can lay eggs*, all by herself.

![Figure 1.4 Chickens can lay eggs](image)

As readers, we will never know if she knew that the word *chicken* defeated her the first time and that since then, and behind the scenes, she has been practising getting it right. What is clear, however, from her new sentence is that she can not only now spell the tricky word: Maisha has moved on from the understanding of individual letters making up words, and her words have now become sentences that make sense and carry meaning.

### How children learn to write

The theory of how children learn to write and, furthermore, how they become successful writers remains under-researched, when compared with research into reading (Myhill, 2005; Kress, 1994). One key theorist was Vygotsky (1982): his work at the beginning of the twentieth century highlighted that children discover through the process of learning to draw things that they are beginning to draw speech. This in turn becomes a method of writing letters and words and very soon they begin to realise that reading and writing does something, it communicates and it has a purpose (Vygotsky, 1982:117). His notion was that as written language develops, it becomes a complex and new form of speech; a system that allows meanings to be attached to signs and symbols. This in turn leads to a blurring of what constitutes a writing activity. For example, reflect back on Jonas’s map – was this a piece of writing or was he drawing? A study by Larkin (2010) into early marking-making found that young children do not register a difference between these activities because both involve using a pencil. So in a sense, when children learn to write they are ‘learning to represent aspects of their world’ (Parr et al., 2009) and, therefore, in order to shape their texts, children need to draw on their personal interpretations of the world and events. As you review a child’s piece of writing you are reflecting on their complex social worlds where ‘already existent texts intermingle to create new ones’. This may be presented in a multimodal format including texts combined with oral, visual or gestural modes.
This notion of a combination of images and text colliding to create new meanings is illustrated in six-year-old Ben’s Christmas writing.

**Jottings**

Read through Ben’s writing and make a list of all the features that he’s included, remembering to reflect back on Christie’s notion of multimodal writing (2003).

What did you have on your list? Maybe you thought about context and started your list with *It’s Christmas*, perhaps you thought about the surface features of his writing and included *Knows about apostrophes*, or possibly *Writes from left to right*. All of which are correct, but what is invisible to the reader is the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of this piece of writing. It is an artefact that captures a particular point in time.

What the reader is unaware of is that six-year-old Ben is attending his granddad’s funeral, surrounded by busy adults doing the kinds of things that adults do at funerals. Ben sits at the kitchen table with the stickers and pens given to him by his grandma and he crafts his text. His work does what Christmas messages should do: it offers a bit of hope, is interactive and multimodal, and just as with a song or poem, it invites the audience to listen. The writing also demonstrates something deeper than the text on the page: it helped him to connect an
unfamiliar situation with something familiar. That is the power of writing. It allows children to put into words and pictures how they feel.

Demands on the young writer

Cremin and Myhill (2012) argue that writing is a deliberate act and one that has to be taught – shaping thoughts into words is complex. Writing is also not a ‘one-off’ activity, hence the emphasis this book places on writing as a process, or a layered experience – one that builds on previous experiences and, hopefully, leads to more crafted and refined writing. In the 1980s and 1990s the notion of writing as a verb, rather than as a noun, was emphasised (Bearne, 2002). The idea was that the process of writing is just as important as the output or product. If, like Vygotsky, we make the connection between speech and writing, it makes sense to reflect on the process of writing words with that of the spoken word. Speech is fleeting and relies on a shared experience. The speaker is encouraged by a listener who supports, extends or just nods in acknowledgement at what the speaker is saying. Writing can be transitory. It might be a note or a typed word that is quickly deleted or rubbed out, but it is more often precise and organised. Writing requires ideas and needs time to be crafted, and as the words come together on a page or screen, a permanent record of those ideas or thoughts is created. This is what can make writing so challenging for young writers. If you are aware that you cannot spell well, or if you know that your handwriting is tricky to read, this can make the act of writing feel like a daunting prospect. For the developing writer in your classroom, these things matter, as will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Over to you

Think about the writing that you have done over the past week and make a list. Having created the list, think about the types of writing you completed and for what purpose. Was the writing an end in itself, or did the writing contribute to a different type of end product? If you had a shopping list, then the end product would have been a cupboard full of food. If there was a note to a family member, then maybe there was the conveyance of an emotion or an instruction. Further reflection on what is on your list of writing will also give you an insight – not only into your own definition of writing, but also the extent of your writing. You may have found yourself surprised by the amount, or indeed the lack of writing you created. Furthermore, did your list include emails or text messages? If so, your view of writing may reflect the more recent, and previously mentioned, multimodal approaches to text design. Were there any examples of handwritten letters or cards to family members who would not have appreciated a more digital form of communication? All of these things are important when you are designing authentic and appropriate writing activities for your classes.
Over 30 years ago, Frank Smith (1982) suggested that in order to understand the complexities and challenges of writing, it helped to separate it into two specific areas: transcriptional skills and compositional skills. Composition skills are concerned with getting ideas, the grammar and selection of words – in essence, doing what authors do – and the transcriptional skills involve the physical effort of writing, including the spelling, capitalisation, punctuation, paragraphing and legibility of the writing (Smith, 1982:20). You may also see these terms referred to as authorship or secretarial skills (Latham, 2002) and what is being suggested is that writers bring together ideas about a piece of writing — the compositional skills — and skills for the writing — the transcriptional skills. While it may be obvious that in order to write, you need to have something to write about and the skills to write it down, Smith went further and argued that in order to be a successful writer, the compositional and transcriptional skills should be taught separately – and that transcriptional skills should always be last (1982:23). This is an interesting parallel, as is discussed in Chapter 3, to the presentation of the national curriculum for writing (DfE, 2013) where transcription, which includes grammar, handwriting and spelling are presented first. It is for you to decide if you think this is a deliberate positioning of transcription as being more important than composition, or ideas for writing. Note also the shift from Smith’s (1982) use of grammar for composition to a narrower concept of grammar for structure and organisation.

**Individual voices**

All children in your class will benefit from a range of approaches to composition and transcription skills, and this is particularly true of children who may have cognitive problems, for example dyslexia or dyspraxia. Such children may find these dual demands of writing difficult. In order to support them, consider the differentiation and personalisation of their writing tasks. It is important to lay the foundations for writing with an emphasis on oral work, and for composition, look for alternative ways for children to record their ideas. Children who have sensory impairments will benefit from writing tasks that are adapted to their specific needs – and this may involve having a multisensory approach or using other adults as scaffolds, or who can remove the barriers that transcription skills can present. The use of visual cues and symbols can support those children who have social and communication difficulties with the chance to share their ideas with a focus on content rather than on the handwriting or spelling. But for all children, providing a purpose for writing needs to be at the core of quality writing experiences, and this is what should remain at the heart of your practice, regardless of government changes and policy initiatives.

**Policy and practice**

Over the last 50 years, the teaching of writing has been typified by very public debates about concerns over writing attainment (Ofsted, 2009; Fisher, 2006; Ofsted, 2005). In addition, discourse has been characterised by a concern over teachers who do not teach writing well, first
highlighted in the 1980s White Paper *Teaching Quality* (DfES, 1983). At this time, practice in England was strongly influenced by approaches to writing instruction emanating from the US and Australia, which led to the introduction of the over-prescriptive National Literacy Strategy (DfES, 1999). For over 30 years, the teaching of writing has focused on particular models of classroom writing: the workshop approach (Graves, 1983); the skills-based approach (Berninger and Swanson, 1994); genre theory (Snyder, 2008) and, more recently, through a return to a skills-based approach within a prescriptive curriculum (DfE, 2006) which has now metamorphosed into the same skills-based approach, but within a less prescriptive but more accountable framework (DfE, 2013).

Government policy rarely mirrors the type of engagement with writing that happens for children away from their classrooms, and therefore it fails to recognise how teachers might build on the type of writing that children are doing at home. This is reflected in Ofsted reports (2009; 2011) which suggest that schools make insufficient links with children’s out-of-school experiences and, consequently, children feel that English is a subject with little relevance to their lives.

Where does that leave the knowledge that Emily demonstrates in this story written at home?

As a Year 2 pupil, Emily might not be expected to create such a lengthy text as this, or to use phrases such as ‘soft and sound’, rather than the expected *safe and sound*. Or indeed, maybe a

![Emily's story](image)
target for her would be to make sure the writing began at the margin. However, what she is telling the reader is that she likes writing and that she is enjoying telling a story based on her real-life Christmas experience. She may also be writing more at home than at school, so where is the opportunity in Emily’s classroom for her to share these out-of-school practices?

**No excuses**

*Ensure that your classroom is a place where children have the time and space to write.*

In addition, drop the drawbridge between home and school and invite children to bring in and share their home-produced writing, or find out what skills or techniques they bring to a new piece of writing.

At the heart of the writing process is the notion that meaning-making is of huge importance for children and their teachers, who need to plan writing activities that are engaging and meaningful. When children know that the writing does matter, they write more and they write better. Bearne (2002) asks practitioners to question whether they are writing teachers, or teachers of writing, and this is a question that this book will continue to refer back to.

If we want children to write enthusiastically and creatively, then teachers need to have that same enthusiasm when it is time to start writing. One of the features of high-quality literacy lessons is when teachers have good subject knowledge and a clear understanding of the individual needs of their pupils (Ofsted, 2009:53). As a writing teacher you need to have considered some of the wider debates about writing. For example, you may already have very specific views about the nature of English as a subject (Ofsted, 2009:19), or you may have a particular attitude towards writing. Beyond the practical considerations in planning writing, what is crucial is the extent to which you are aware of your role in supporting the young writers in your classes. Therefore, the starting point is to know what children think about writing and whether your definition of writing matches theirs.

**References**


