

QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

Knowing what works : an evidence based approach to the development of writing

Quantity / opportunities to write	Balancing pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities and lessons
Pupils having the opportunity to plan their writing	Building pupil background knowledge
Classroom ethos	Pupil confidence
Vocabulary	Sentence construction
Goals	Collaboration
Grammar in context	Handwriting
Developing revising and editing skills	Receiving feedback – use of formative assessment

Quantity of writing	<p>The amount of time pupils spend writing does make a difference. Pupils need the opportunity to practise. This can be through completing writing tasks in English lessons and in other subjects. Ideally, the opportunity to practise needs to be closely associated to new learning that has taken place.</p> <p>Research shows that pupils can boost the quality of their writing by approximately 12 percentiles by having the opportunity to write often. Researchers have not identified an optimum amount of time that primary aged pupils should write for. One study suggested at least 30 minutes a day (not necessarily in one block).</p> <p>How much time do pupils spend writing in your class? You may need to consider increasing the length and frequency of writing tasks across the curriculum. Pupils can also be encouraged to write at home (e.g. setting writing homework) and</p>
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	<p>to keep a writer's notebook. If pupils collect lots of new techniques but are not applying them in writing, then it is likely to be that lessons are moving on too quickly with insufficient time being devoted to learning and practising the new technique.</p> <p>It is equally important to recognise that quantity of writing alone will not lead to good levels of progress. If pupils spend all their time writing, then confidence and length of writing will increase, but the level of sophistication and quality is unlikely to rise as quickly. Progress is maximised when pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities are in balance across a half term.</p>
Pupils planning writing	<p>Four examples of why planning is important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginning writers typically convert the task of writing into a 'tell all they know' task. They often use a memory or a relevant idea to create a sentence and then use this as a stimulus for the next one. This approach to stacking sentences can result in a jumble of thoughts with sentences being ordered in a haphazard way - which is then difficult for the reader to follow. • Pupils often find it difficult to be selective in what to include when writing. This can often be seen in recounts, where three paragraphs in, the pupil has just finished recounting getting on the bus and the key part of the trip hasn't yet begun to be retold! In these cases, the writing tends to be boring, and pupils often run out of steam before they reach the end of the recount. • Without planning, the end of stories often disintegrates into a 'and then...and then... and then...' approach to writing. • All writers do to some extent plan (or change plans) as they write. However, if all of the thinking about content, style, structure and vocabulary are taking place at this point, the brain is overloaded. Sentence structures tend to be weaker and any new or partially learnt techniques are left out, as these aspects require plenty of mental capacity. <p>For numerous reasons (e.g. time pressures, lack of pupil enthusiasm for planning, the cognitive difficulties pupils encounter when planning, pupils' inability to use plans well) teachers are often reluctant to devote time to pupils planning writing responses. When conducting book reviews, it is easy to see the impact of this on writing – e.g. poor construction, limited vocabulary choices, unambitious sentence structures, lack of detail, breakdown in sense. A 21 percentile jump in the quality of writing is possible through pupils planning their writing.</p> <p>There are many different types of planning – e.g. bullet point lists, brainstorming, orally sharing ideas, story maps, post-it note story boards, planning task sheets. Select approaches that are appropriate for the task, explain their importance</p>

	to pupils, break the process down into chunks, model how to plan, share examples of good plans, give feedback on plans, and show pupils how to produce writing from a plan.
Background knowledge	<p>This is particularly important for disadvantaged pupils. Imagine being asked to write about the Antarctic as a story setting when you have no/little knowledge of the area, no ideas about what it looks like, no experience of it, never see any pictures, have a limited vocabulary associated with it, etc. In these circumstances, we might expect the writing to be poor. When pupils have limited background knowledge it makes idea creation difficult, writing lacks detail and word choice tends to be very general.</p> <p>For example – when reading ‘Tom’s midnight garden’ as a class text, children were asked to write part of a story where Tom goes out into the garden. Due to the nature of the house and the time period, the garden is a formal one. Now ask yourself how many of your class have visited a formal garden? Even if they have, which ones were taking note of the layout, the names of trees and plants, the experience of walking on the gravel path – and which were more interested in where the ice-cream van was or finding the play area? Not surprisingly, the writing produced by pupils referenced ‘trees’ and ‘leaves’ rather than more specific terms like ‘pine needles’ and ‘yew trees’ used by the author. This is a good example of when combining non-fiction and fiction texts can be advantageous to pupils.</p> <p><i>Building background knowledge:</i></p> <p>This can be achieved in a variety of ways – e.g. direct experience, handling artefacts, examining photographs and images, sharing experiences, reading fiction and non-fiction, watching video clips, direct explanation and teaching by an adult.</p> <p>It is important to model how to make notes from research (e.g. the best way of making notes from a video, how to select key points form a paragraph in a non-fiction text) and how to turn research into pieces of writing. Don’t underestimate the need to teach pupils how to use non-fiction books. Seek opportunities to use non-fiction texts as whole class texts or in group guided reading. Having a range of books of different levels of complexity helps when pupils are conducting their own research and remember that direct teaching of a topic can be more beneficial than independent research – so best to combine both!</p>
Vocabulary	<p>One of the greatest distinctions between the writing produced by pupils and that of published authors is their choice of vocabulary, e.g. precise nouns and vivid verbs. Through careful choice of vocabulary, the author can establish a very clear mental image in the mind of the reader. Brainstorming and collecting vocabulary before writing makes a significant difference to the quality of writing. It is difficult for pupils to think of vocabulary as they write. Give pupils the chance to plan vocabulary before writing and revise vocabulary choices after writing.</p> <p>It is important that pupils consider the effect of the words chosen, e.g. an understanding that the distance between two people might make a difference between choosing whispering or shouting as a replacement to ‘said’ or that situation/motive/character trait might make a difference, e.g. whispering a plan, or shouting a warning.</p>

	<p>Examine word choice in texts being read; magpie vocabulary; use of a thesaurus; provide word banks and mats; share and discuss vocabulary; make vocabulary clines; provide teacher modelling of word choice; play with sentences – e.g. group work on improving a sentence; set tasks which require pupils to describe an object from a group of similar items.</p> <p>It is also useful to consider words which pupils need to learn alternatives for, such as ‘got’ and ‘went’.</p> <p>For the purposes of teacher modelling, consider purchasing ‘Descriptosaurus’ books written by Alison Wilcox.</p>
Classroom ethos and atmosphere	<p>Many studies have shown that classroom ethos makes a difference to the amount of progress pupils make in writing. There needs to be a safe environment in which pupils feel comfortable to take risks. Features of high impact classrooms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enthusiastic teacher. • Interesting tasks / good reasons to write. • Safe-environment to take risks. • Talk and discussion is a key element of lessons. • Playing with choices – e.g. word order, which sentence is best, word choice. • A community of writers – collaboration, shared writing, celebrating successes, working together on improvements. This includes the teacher as a writer – modelling writing, showing pupils how to revise writing, sharing thoughts during the writing process, using think alouds to share choices and decisions being made, illustrating the difficulties and complexities of writing. • Text rich / book rich curriculum. • Celebratory. • Real audiences – such as younger pupils, creating booklets, sending work home, displaying work. • High expectations – including a focus on accuracy and effectiveness of writing choices. • Belief that all pupils can become better writers. Acknowledgement of what writers do to improve their craft. • Adapting tasks to align to the interests and needs of the pupils.
Goals	<p>Building knowledge of the goal to be achieved can lead to a 28 percentile point jump in the quality of writing. Pupils need to understand the genre, the audience and purpose of the task. They also need a clear understanding of ‘what a good one looks like’ so they know the standard they are aiming for and the features to include. Setting out the goals is one way of establishing high expectations.</p> <p>At the moment, this can be a problem in English lessons. As many writing tasks are now based on a whole class text, it can be easy to ignore the importance of learning about the text type that pupils are being asked to create. If pupils</p>

	<p>have been reading a second world war story and are then asked to write a diary entry about being evacuated to the countryside, teachers need to remember to actually teach diary writing. Pupils will need to understand how diary writing compares to other types of writing, the types of sentence structures that diaries might typically use, perhaps specific grammar issues such as tenses (writing about yesterday, writing about what is happening as the character is actually writing the diary, considering tomorrow), the type of content one might expect to see and the level of formality that the character might use.</p> <p>It is also important that pupils have access to several models of good work – at varying levels of sophistication – so that all pupils can benefit from seeing how writing becomes increasingly sophisticated and learning is accessible to all pupils.</p>
<p>Collaboration</p>	<p>Asking pupils to work together as they plan, draft, revise and edit their writing can lead to a boost in performance. Collaboration tends to spark more communication between pupils. Pupils are more likely to have to explain their ideas to others, seek clarification on points they are not sure of and ask questions of each other and the teacher. A great system for collaboration is Kegan’s cooperative learning structures – https://www.kaganonline.com/free_articles/dr_spencer_kagan/281/Kagan-Structures-A-Miracle-of-Active-Engagement</p> <p>Group size of 4 is the most ideal size for collaborative learning.</p> <p>Collaboration can also be a good stepping stone to independent writing – groups, then pairs, then individually. Whole class shared writing can really support lower ability writers to see how a piece of writing can be constructed. Whole class and group sentence level activities are an enjoyable form of practising new techniques.</p>
<p>Sentence construction</p>	<p>Teaching sentence construction can lead to a 21 percentile jump in the quality of writing. Skilled writers invest considerable energy into transforming their ideas into grammatically correct sentences.</p> <p>Key strategies:</p> <p>Sentence combining (see work by Bruce Sadler including ‘Teacher’s guide to effective sentence writing’ by Bruce Sadler, 2012) https://www.amazon.co.uk/Teachers-Effective-Sentence-Special-Needs-Learners/dp/1462506771/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1535369040&sr=8-1&keywords=bruce+sadler+sentences</p> <p>Numerous research studies show sentence combining to be an effective instructional strategy for helping writers to develop sentence structures. (Please see separate section on sentence combining.)</p> <p>In this strategy, pupils are provided with two or more simple sentences which they have to combine, e.g. ‘The dog is black. The dog is big.’ becomes, ‘The dog is big and black.’</p>

For example: My house is small. My house is red.

Could be transformed into : My house is small and red. Or... The small red house is mine. - depending on what the writer wanted to achieve.

Sentence combining helps writers to understand the choices that are available to them and enables them to convey long and complex ideas more easily. The higher goal of sentence combining is not to create longer sentences, but to consider how to make 'better' sentences that convey more accurately the writers' intended message to the readers. In fact, the trick is to write fewer words, not more. It helps them to tighten and clarify their thoughts by decomposing lengthy sentences, or by rearranging, elaborating, or editing parts of sentences. The skills they learn will also be useful for them when they are revising their own work.

Pupils can be asked to break down complex sentences into simple sentences, for example:

Frankenstein – "I quitted my seat, and walked on, although the darkness and storm increased every minute, and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head." (Shelley, 1818/2003).

Can be broken down into:

I quitted my seat. I walked on. The darkness increased. The storm increased. The increase was by the minute. The thunder burst. It burst with a crash. The crash was terrific. The thunder was over my head.

Building sentences from the kernel of a sentence. E.g.

- The man ate.
- The old man ate.
- The old man ate hastily.
- Hastily, the old man ate his breakfast.
- Hastily, the old man ate his breakfast of porridge.
- Sitting at the long wooden table, the old man hastily ate his breakfast of porridge while it was still hot.
- Sitting at the rickety pine table, the old man gobbled his porridge, eager to finish it while it was still hot.
- Sitting at the long wooden table, the old man hastily ate his porridge, because today was a special day and he was eager to leave the cottage.
- The plate was filled with a delicious breakfast: sausages, bacon, eggs, mushrooms, beans, hash browns and fried tomato. Next to the plate was a pile of hot buttered toast and a steaming mug of strong tea. The old man couldn't believe his luck. He licked his lips, tucked in the blue and white checked bib into the collar of his shirt, and started to devour the feast before him.

Often teachers start by writing a complex sentence on the board as a model. This can be difficult for pupils to replicate as they are often unclear as to how the parts work together. Starting with a simple sentence and adding in the technique you wish to illustrate is more powerful and will be more effective for lower ability writers.

Replacements for parts of a sentence, e.g.

Bob	kicked	the ball.
Bob	bounced	the ball.
Bob	dribbled	the ball.
The boy with the fiery red hair	punched	the ball.
The captain of the Scarborough tigers	struck	the ball.
The small boy	slapped	the ball.
The fierce tiger	smacked	the ball.
The boy with the fiery red hair	punched	the ball with his fist, hitting it over the wall into Mrs Potter's garden.
The boy with the fiery red hair	punched	the ball and it sailed high into the air towards the basketball net.
Bob, with increasing confidence,	skilfully dribbled	the ball between the defenders to score the winning goal.

Grammar in context

Recent research (e.g. Debra Mayhill and Sheffield university) have shown that grammar activities have more impact when they are set in context. For example, if pupils are completing a grammar activity on adjectives and are being asked to write a spooky story, then all of the sentence level work being undertaken should also be in a spooky context rather than a random collection of sentences (as is seen in most grammar text book activities). When grammar is set in context, it helps pupils to transfer the ideas into their own writing. (Random context activities are best used as additional practice and consolidation tasks.)

Mayhill advises:

- Always link a grammar feature to its effect on writing.
- Use grammar terms, but explain them through examples.
- Encourage high quality discussions about language and effects.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use authentic examples from authentic texts. • Use model patterns for children to imitate. • Support children to design their writing by making deliberate language choices. • Encourage language play, experimentation and risk taking. <p>(Recommended book: Essential primary grammar by Debra Mayhill, Susan Jones, Annabel Watson & Helen Lines, 2016.) (Recommended book: Understanding and Teaching Grammar in the Primary Classroom by Josh Lury 2016)</p>						
Editing / revising / feedback	<p>Actually teaching pupils specifically how to plan, draft, revise and edit writing can lead to a 35 percentile jump in the quality of writing. The key factor here is developing pupils’ ability to perform these tasks. Teachers need to:</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="600 614 2029 1337"> <tr> <td data-bbox="600 614 1077 975"> <p>Use structures such as CUPS (Capital letters, understanding, punctuation and spelling) ARMS (Add, remove, move, substitute) Six traits of writing (Ideas, Organisation, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions) Routines – e.g. editing stations</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1077 614 1554 975"> <p>Model how to make revisions and changes to writing. For example, modelling how to change weak verbs to vivid verbs. Pupils are then asked to revise their verb choices. Once the pupils have mastered this, the teacher models another strategy for revising writing.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1554 614 2029 975"> <p>Share before and after versions and consider the differences. Celebrate improvements. Push for accuracy. Consider ‘effectiveness’ not just use of a technique.</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="600 975 1077 1337"> <p>Use WAGOLLS for pupils to make comparisons against. Ensure pupils have resources to help them, e.g. if asked to improve dialogue in a story – then pupils should have access to models to support them in achieving this. Support pupils to fully understand the success criteria – and don’t have too many!</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1077 975 1554 1337"> <p>Group editing and revising / peer editing and revising. Working collaborative helps to build skills, knowledge and understanding. Whole class – Why do I like this sentence? Improve this sentence? How many alternatives could we produce? Fix the error.</p> </td> <td data-bbox="1554 975 2029 1337"> <p>Prioritise verbal feedback. Use 1:1 conferencing and small group feedback. Group pupils together to make it easier to support pupils when improving writing. Provide sufficient time for revising writing.</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Use structures such as CUPS (Capital letters, understanding, punctuation and spelling) ARMS (Add, remove, move, substitute) Six traits of writing (Ideas, Organisation, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions) Routines – e.g. editing stations</p>	<p>Model how to make revisions and changes to writing. For example, modelling how to change weak verbs to vivid verbs. Pupils are then asked to revise their verb choices. Once the pupils have mastered this, the teacher models another strategy for revising writing.</p>	<p>Share before and after versions and consider the differences. Celebrate improvements. Push for accuracy. Consider ‘effectiveness’ not just use of a technique.</p>	<p>Use WAGOLLS for pupils to make comparisons against. Ensure pupils have resources to help them, e.g. if asked to improve dialogue in a story – then pupils should have access to models to support them in achieving this. Support pupils to fully understand the success criteria – and don’t have too many!</p>	<p>Group editing and revising / peer editing and revising. Working collaborative helps to build skills, knowledge and understanding. Whole class – Why do I like this sentence? Improve this sentence? How many alternatives could we produce? Fix the error.</p>	<p>Prioritise verbal feedback. Use 1:1 conferencing and small group feedback. Group pupils together to make it easier to support pupils when improving writing. Provide sufficient time for revising writing.</p>
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Handwriting

For some pupils handwriting is a limiting factor that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Handwriting, particularly in EYFS and KS1 is a critical factor in writing progression. For older pupils, it is likely to be a smaller number of pupils for whom handwriting is a significant barrier to progress.

Why does handwriting matter?

- Having to think about letter formation ties up working memory. Pupils have to hold the sentence they wish to write in their heads and this can be disrupted by having to think about letter formation. You can often see examples of this in pupils texts – where sentences start again or sense breaks down.
- Slow handwriting means that pupils write less. We know that quantity makes a difference, so these pupils make less progress because they practise less.
- If pupils have only produced a short amount of text, the amount of feedback the teacher can provide is limited. If it is hard to read writing, it can be difficult to pick up spelling and punctuation issues.
- When handwriting is difficult to read, pupils tend to receive congratulatory feedback, such as ‘good use of adjectives’ rather than developmental feedback.
- When handwriting is poor it is difficult for the pupil and others to read. This can limit collaborative learning. It is also likely to damage pupil confidence – they don’t see themselves as being good at writing.

A disproportionate percentage of lower ability writers have handwriting problems. This provides good evidence that handwriting hampers progress and therefore attainment over time.

What to consider:

- Gross motor skills.
- Fine motor skills.
- Wrist and finger strength.
- The ability of the child to visualise the letter. It is difficult to scribe a letter ‘f’ if you do not know what one looks like.
- Pencil grip.
- Directionality of specific letters – the best way to scribe a letter or letter combination.
- Sound to letter correspondence. Sometimes the pupil can say the sound when presented with a digraph or trigraph but find it much harder to perform the task the other way around - to visualise the letters when they hear the sound.
- Explain the reasons why handwriting matters – it is not just about presentation but also about speed and working memory.

Look for opportunities to reinforce handwriting, e.g. tracing over spelling lists printed in a ‘dotty font’.

For pupils struggling with handwriting, it is not ideal to have the model on the board – instead, have the model right in front of them and concentrate on accurate reconstruction, including directionality. Model directionality.