



Getting to the end point – real, quality independent writing.

Emma Mann, from Penn Wood Primary in Slough, takes us through how they get their pupils to the end point – real, quality independent writing.

At Penn Wood, the stages of Talk for Writing support ‘the end point’, i.e. getting children to write well independently. In order to do this, we follow Talk for Writing’s three Is process.

1. **Imitation:** children learn a high-quality model whilst also being exposed to other models and snippets of writing. This is the point at which children unravel the how of writing – how certain effects can be achieved.
2. **Innovation:** children are guided through the writing process with the teacher modelling. Choosing the right ‘level of innovation’ is key so that challenge is high.
3. **Independent Application:** this is the culmination of the writing process when children pull together all that they have internalised and learnt about a particular type of writing and apply it in an independent piece or number of pieces.

How can independent writing be the very best it can be?

At Penn Wood, we ask ourselves the question, what do we need to get right in order for the independent writing to be the best that it can be and so that children achieve mastery within the writing process?

The following elements are central:

- Internalisation of main story events; independent re-telling and embellishment.
- Internalisation of the writers’ toolkit and underlying story structure.
- Innovation (shared writing and independent) using the boxed-up structure and skillful manipulation of the toolkit.
- Independent application – independent planning and writing using stimuli and drama.

Phase 1 – Imitation

Retelling not re-learning

In the first stage of Talk for Writing children internalise a story. Talk for Writing is often misunderstood as merely children chanting stories. We have found it’s more beneficial to focus on children’s independent retelling.

Children begin by mapping the story themselves. Instead of word-for-word retelling, what follows is an internalisation of main events or ‘scenes’ in the story. This means that when they come to retell, children aren’t restrained by the need to know each word. Instead, they can embellish the story as they’ve learnt it more loosely. They use their knowledge of story language and sentence structures from their reading to support the embellishment of the model story. Children who are particularly confident may orally innovate immediately. However, some children may still require the structure and scaffold of a more detailed text map and more strongly encoded word for word story.

Following much exploration of the model story with this Reading as a Reader stage, including a focus on reading and grammar teaching within context (which supports the writing phases excellently), as well as opportunities for drama and writing in role, the Reading as a Writer stage is essential and provides the bridge between reading and writing. The two

key elements of this part of TfW are the creation of the writers’ toolkit and the boxing up of the underlying structure of a text.





Creating a writer's toolkit

If we want children to become great independent writers, they need to know how to achieve certain effects. Whether it's creating suspense or describing a character, young writers need to know the tools to use to do this. It is therefore helpful to create a writer's toolkit.

When creating a writer's toolkit, it is important that teachers bear in mind that the individual elements on it are 'tools, not rules'. The toolkit comprises a bank of great techniques, but a writer does not need to tick off each one to create a brilliant piece of writing. The creation of a toolkit is always collaborative and as such, teachers guide children through the process of looking at snippets of writing objectively and asking, 'What has the writer done here to achieve this effect?'

At Penn Wood, writer's toolkits are presented pictorially. Not only does this remove the potential barrier of reading for children who are new to English, but the tools also support what we know about memory and internalisation. The process of remembering the symbolic tools is more effortful than reading written ones, which makes the symbols more strongly encoded in long term memory. The symbols are presented in a circle rather than a list to emphasise that it's about choosing different options – it isn't a tick list!

Pictured right: An example of a pictorial toolkit for characterisation

Boxing Up

Just as with writers' toolkits, teachers and children collaboratively 'box up' the model text. Through this process, children are taught to identify the underlying structure. The boxed-up sections of the story then become a useful scaffold for planning during the innovation stage and work as a blueprint for the pieces of writing that follow.

Using different story models

We know that in order to develop wonderful writers, children need to have been exposed to and have internalised a number of models and they leave school with a bank of great stories which inform their own writing. At Penn Wood, time is invested in helping children to internalise the writers' toolkit and the underlying story structures, so that children have an inner bank of story types and of writerly effects. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as removing parts of the toolkit, as can be seen in the picture below.



Phase 2 – Innovation

By the time that these elements have been internalised, children are ready to be guided through the next stage of the process – innovation. Innovation is when you alter some aspects of the story, but keep the basic underlying pattern the same. At Penn Wood, this part of the journey has been adapted to ensure challenge, and reference to the 'levels of innovation' is important here. As the list below shows, the levels of innovation start with simple substitution and then become more complex.

Levels of innovation and challenge:

1. **Substitution:** change words, characters, settings etc.
2. **Addition:** add to or embellish to expand/extend a text
3. **Alteration:** alter part of a text in ways that change the course of events
4. **Genre switching:** change text type, e.g. switch a story to a newspaper report, etc. Change story type, e.g. to sci-fi, fantasy, etc.
5. **Change time/person, view:** past → present, etc.
6. **Reorder** the text, e.g. flashbacks and time slips
7. **Write in the style of** different authors
8. **Sequels and prequels.**
9. **Blend** story types



Substitution

Whilst writing using the substitution technique (i.e. swapping words in a sentence for alternatives) is essential in the early years and when children are new to English, solely using this technique throughout primary school would not grow independent writers.

Different Types of Innovation

During innovation, teachers need to show one or a combination of the techniques listed above. For example, in a Year 5 unit on character flaws in which children internalised the story of Icarus, children innovated by writing a prequel to the Icarus storyline and by changing perspective through which the story was told.

By the time children have been taught and understood a number of these styles of innovation, children may well use some of them freely in their independent writing.

Prior to shared writing in innovation lessons, children are shown what a finished one looks like; it pays to show children excellence before co-constructing a piece together. Not only does this provide a model of excellence but it's also another opportunity for children to magpie ideas. In the shared and modelled writing that ensues, teachers make visible use of the boxed up underlying structure to write from their planning, and skilful use of the writers' toolkit that has been built through the unit. At this stage, the invisible thought processes that are central to writing are made visible and teachers make their writerly thoughts audible.

During innovation, children have also collaboratively created a piece of shared writing, its construction led skilfully by the teacher, as well as having completed their own piece of innovated writing. The independent application stage is the children's opportunity to combine the techniques that they have mastered and create a piece of independent writing.

Phase 3 – Independent Application

By the time the third stage, independent application, is reached, children should have confidently internalised three things:

- a model story
- a writers' toolkit
- the underlying structure (through boxing up)

These are the three vital elements that lead to independent writing.

Using drama

In the same Year 5 unit that began with the character flaw story of Icarus, and was innovated by creating a prequel, children were encouraged to write their own independent character flaw story using well known characters from children's literature and film, such as Scar from the Lion King.

At Penn Wood, this stage in the process is often supported by work with the drama coach. In the Year 5 unit, children had the opportunity, prior to writing, to explore character flaws such as jealousy, sloth or envy through drama. It is important then, that children are given the opportunity to plan their piece of writing and that time is invested so that children can gradually apply the skill and knowledge gained through the unit to create excellent compositions.

By the time children reach UKS2, they are often confident enough to attempt extremely ambitious types of writing at this stage. For example, the Year 5 children within the Icarus unit wrote pieces ranging from stories about jealous queens to stories about the Grinch, many of which included combinations of genres and therefore shifts in formality.



So, what must go well in order for children to become successful independent writers?

In answer to the question ‘what must go well in order for children to become successful independent writers?’, we know the following:

Learn a model text really well: Children need to have internalised an excellent model. Once children are confident storytellers and already have a broad range of sentence structures, the focus should be on internalising main events within a story rather than potentially restrictive word for word retelling.

Create a toolkit: A writer’s toolkit should be co-constructed to provide a bank of tools for creating a certain effect; these techniques become indispensable during writing and they are the knowledge that children gain through a unit. Through shared and modelled writing during innovation, the teacher should explicitly model use of the writers’ toolkit and underlying story structure and make the invisible, visible.

Box it up: The underlying pattern of events – the generic structure of a specific story type – should be learned through the process of boxing up.

Stimulate their writing: Quality stimuli are key and children should be given the opportunity to independently plan and write a full piece of writing.