



Bursting to Write

Talk for Writing trainer, Maria Richards, explores how to teach writing well through Talk for Writing’s short-burst approach.

There are so many things I have learned about teaching writing well. There is the use of a blueprint model, matched to the learning needs of children; there is the place of quality literature to feed children’s knowledge of shaping writing; there is the understanding of the writing elements that create a toolkit for a particular aspect of narrative – to name but a few. However, the one thing that I come back to, time and time again, is the power of short-burst writing as part of warming-up a unit within the Talk for Writing sequence; a process that truly supports children to think like a writer, teaches them to bring their writing alive (painting pictures in their heads of their readers) and helps them to understand the craft of description.

For me, short-burst writing is about exploring possibility and teaching the children how to write. If we want a really powerful setting, that perfectly matches the mood of our story and the plight of our character, how do we write it? If we want a sinister character to appear and create a problem in our story, how do we describe that character effectively? What does it actually look like on paper? This is where short-burst writing can come in. Essentially, it is about exploring and practising the language and skills needed for the writing.

Take describing characters as an example. If I want the children to really describe a character effectively, I will invest time looking at what makes good characterisation and then we will work on crafting the writing. For this, I will take an image and we’ll discuss the type of character we want to portray. Then we will slow the detail and description down by deciding what elements of the character we will describe, for example, eyes, jaw, brows, mouth and so on. We will then work together, crafting the best way to describe each of those elements. This usually starts with a collection of vocabulary that we could use to describe the feature and then apply that to the prose.

Looking at the image below (from an internet search) with a Year 4/5 class recently, we

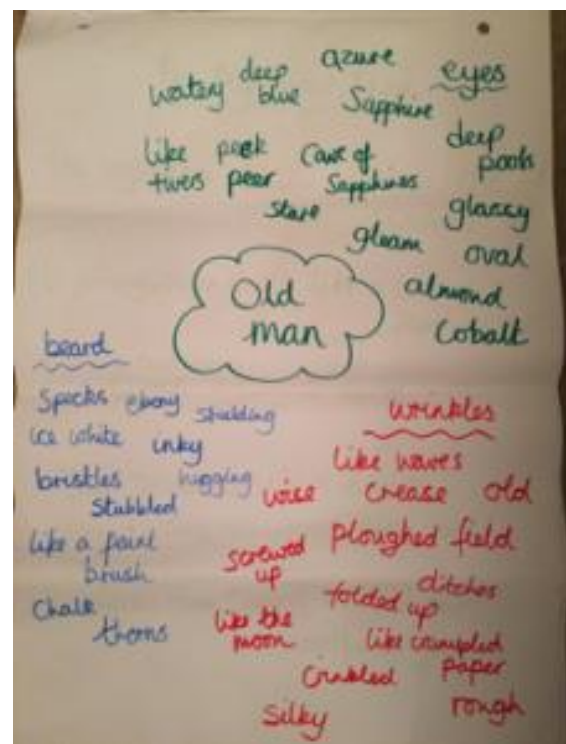
started by deciding on what we would write about:



We chose:

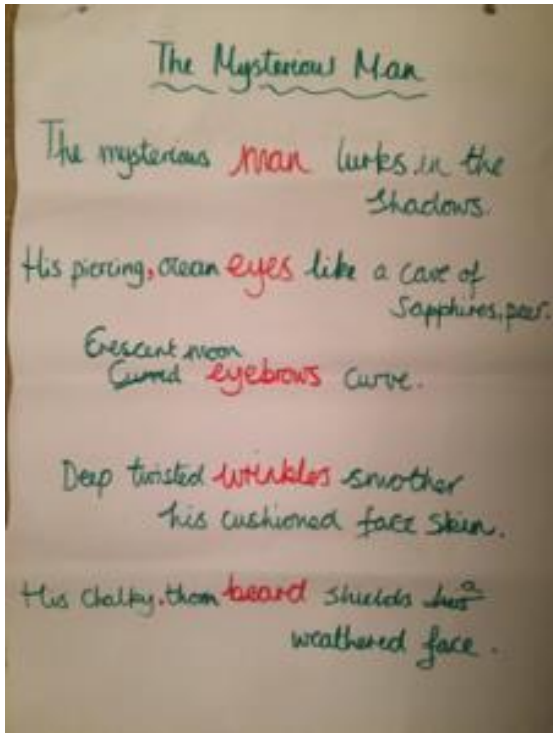
- man**
- eyes**
- eyebrows**
- wrinkles**
- beard**

We then gathered vocabulary, with me extending where needed:





After that, we worked together through shared writing, to craft each line of description, using the best possible language:



The Mysterious Man

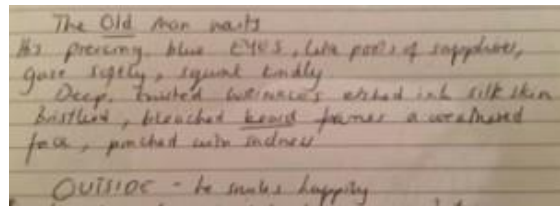
The mysterious **man** lurks in the shadows.
His piercing, ocean **eyes** like a cave of sapphires, peer.
Crescent moon **eyebrows** curve.
Deep, twisted **wrinkles** smother his cushioned skin.
His chalky, thorn **beard** shields his weathered face.

Tyne Class, Year 4/5 Holway Park Primary School, Taunton, Somerset.

When writing with the children, I had a basic **toolkit for quality description** that I kept referring them to and this is what we want to get children thinking about themselves as they focus in on the description they want to create:

- Powerful adjectives/adverbs bring the picture alive – twisted wrinkles
- Name it (nouns) the Mercedes
- Be precise with verbs – the man lurks
- Use a touch of figurative language – e.g. alliteration, simile, metaphor, personification like a cave of sapphires; Crescent moon eyebrows
- Try fresh, new combinations - cushioned skin

I had also planned out a possible framework for the shared writing, so I could keep my teaching points on track and help guide the children to the best possible outcomes. Thorough planning at this stage pays off when getting the best possible language development with the children. You can see below that the class writing doesn't mirror this exactly, but it supports the teaching effectively.



Once we had shared the short burst writing, children went on to have a go on their own to apply the skills and language modelled.

The power of this comes though when applying the short burst into the stories that the children write. Once we have our character description, we can show the children how to raid this when they write their stories. Take the example below of applying the character work into the story. The children were writing modern versions of Little Red Riding Hood and dropping in a character that was waiting at the end of an alleyway that she has to walk through. This is what we wrote together before they applied their characters into their own stories.



Little Red paused at the edge of the dingy alleyway. She glanced up and realised she wasn't alone. The mysterious man she'd spotted in the woods was lurking ahead of her. In the ~~moonlight~~^{shadows}, she could just make out his features. His piercing ocean eyes, like a cave of sapphires, peered into the darkness. Deep, twisted wrinkles seemed to smother his ghostly skin and a chalky-thorn beard hid his weathered face. What was his secret?

This is where we see how we can raise the quality of the children's descriptions by explicitly showing them how to craft each line and then raid ideas to fit the story they are writing.

Essentially, we can use short burst writing for any skills we want to practice and then apply in longer pieces. It might be a short burst of particular sentence patterns or to apply the elements of a toolkit. We may even craft our short bursts through writing free verse poems based on the same idea of forming a spine to describe an image or a real object. The more children do this, the more they have a repertoire of possibilities to draw on when describing and the more they begin to instinctively apply that basic toolkit for description. Take the following examples below written with children in different classes in the same school:

The Owl
 The owl perches.
 His coal eyes as dark as a new moon.
 Beak curved like a scimitar.
 Feathers, white like lightning scattered with inky darkness.
 Knife-like talons pounce, rip, tear.

The Owl

The **owl** perches,
 His coal **eyes** as dark as a new moon.
Beak curved like a scimitar.
Feathers, white like lightning, scattered with inky darkness.
 Knife-like **talons** pounce, rip, tear.
 It stares: a cavalry soldier, a preying tiger, a devil in disguise.

Written with Mersey Class (Year 6)
 Holway Park Primary School, Taunton,
 Somerset.

Like ^{it stares,} a cavalry soldier,
 a preying tiger,
 a devil in disguise.



Short burst writing has transformed the way I think about teaching writing skills and I have now seen how it can powerfully transform children as writers too. Plan it into your Talk for Writing sequences and find your transformations.

Maria Richards is available for Talk for Writing training throughout the UK. Please visit the training page on the Talk for Writing website for more details.

The Tiger

The **tiger** howls.
His fearsome **mouth** like a dark cave.
Arrow-sharp **teeth** hang like vicious bats.
Wiry, wild **whiskers** explode like fireworks.
Blood-red **nose** spies for prey.

Tamar Class (Year 2)
Holway Park Primary School, Taunton,
Somerset.

