



TalkforWriting™

Moving from discursive non-fiction writing in English to discursive writing across the curriculum

Upper KS2 teacher Jamie Grossmith shows how his class applied the skills they learnt about discursive writing in English to history, building their skills across a year.



My class is used to the Talk for Writing (TfW) process. We started our discursive journey early in Y5 English by internalising a text entitled *Should Boys Learn Cookery?* using the TfW text mapping technique as illustrated below. A section of the text was taught at a time over a series of sessions.

Initially, we imitated the text as a whole class before moving to retelling it in table groups. Once the text was fully internalised, children saw the written text. After analysing its structure (see the *underlying pattern* in the boxing up below) the language features of discursive were explored. These were colour coded (illustrated to the right above) allowing the appropriate toolkits to be generated.



The innovation stage

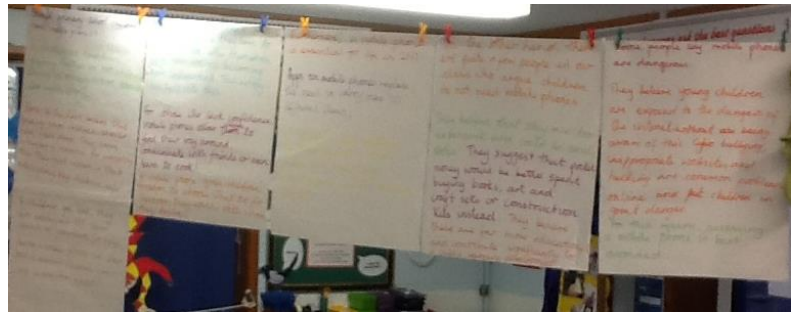
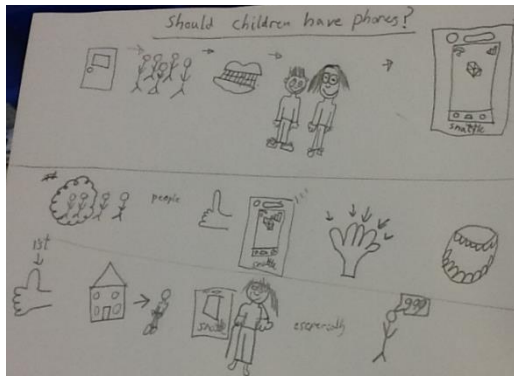
Once the generic language of discursive writing had been internalised (see the magenta-coloured phrases below), we then innovated on it. The issue to discuss now was: *Should primary school children have mobile phones?* We started to plan what to write by identifying the two sides of the argument as shown below:

Children should have mobile phones	Children should not have mobile phones
Safety, walking to and from school	Children are dropped off and therefore don't require them. If parents required, school will phone
Communicate with friends through messaging and other apps. Playing games together	Messages made lead to bullying + cost of calls, messages and/or texts
Use of the internet for research and support eg homework	School has a research library. Books can be borrowed and taken home. Local library is open on Saturday mornings. Books can be borrowed for 2 weeks without charge.

These arguments and counter arguments were then added to the model "boxing up" grid built from the model text at the innovation stage. The magenta colour-coding indicates the generic sentence signposts for discursive text that can be recycled as appropriate for any discussion.

Model Text	Underlying pattern	Innovation
In our class we have been discussing ...	Introduction to the topic being considered – use of a question to engage the reader	Should Primary School children have mobile phones?
Some of the class believe that all children should have to learn cookery ...	Reasons in support	Reasons in favour of Primary School children having mobile phones: safety, communication, research, games, camera, internet
On the other hand, there are quite a few people who believe that boys should not bother with cookery ...	Reasons against	Reasons against children having mobile phones: bullying, screen time, cost, peer pressure, distraction
Finally, having listened to all the arguments that the others have suggested I have made my own mind up ...	Conclusion: evidence to support decision	Choose which argument you agree with and explain your reasons

Children generated their own story maps (see the example to the right here) and orally rehearsed their individual ideas before shared writing of the text. Each paragraph of the shared writing was written on one flipchart sheet, to reinforce paragraph structure. Colour coding was used to emphasise different aspects of the text.



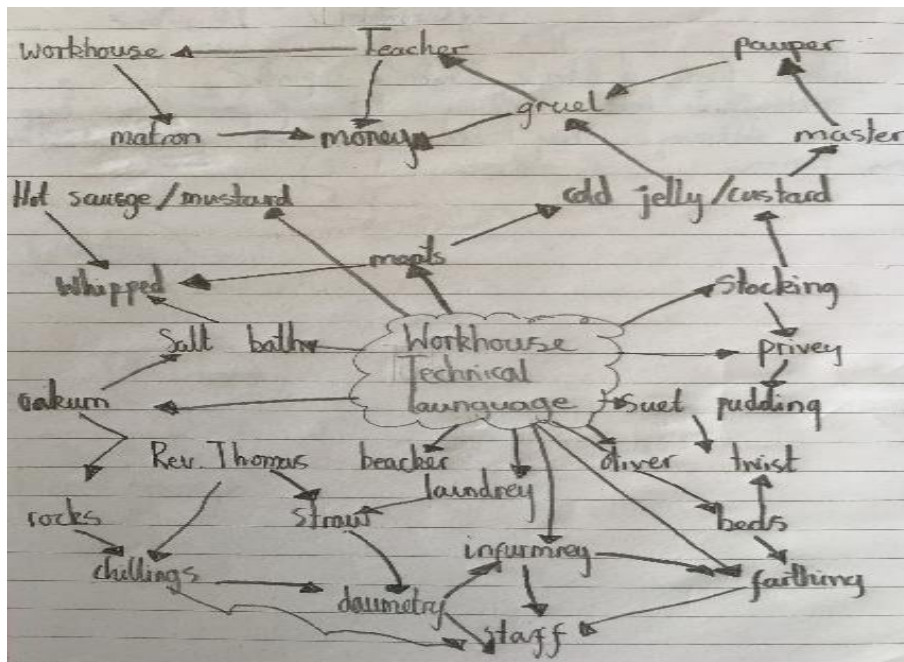
Independent application across the curriculum in history

Through writing their own innovations, the class strengthened their discursive writing skills. They were then able to apply what they had learnt in history units of work as these examples from their writing journey from Y5 to Y6 illustrate.

The first history unit focused on was on Workhouses. At the start of the unit, the key technical language for the unit was introduced. As illustrated here, the key words that would underpin their understanding of the content of the topic like parishes, overseers, wealth, unemployed, paupers, relief, union, guardian, commissioners were put on a never-heard the word-grid.

Word	Never Heard it Before	Heard it but not sure of meaning	Heard it before and can write a simple definition
parishes	X		
overseers	X		
wealth			Having Money. Being rich.
unemployed		✓	
paupers	X		
relief			Happy that something has ended. Something has stopped to someone's pleasure.
union		✓	
guardian			Someone who takes care for someone else. A person who watches over you.
commissioners	X		

As part of the cold task at the start of the unit, this grid helped establish which words the children were already familiar with, which words may need further clarification and which words need introducing. The list was also a useful reminder for me to ensure that I introduced and embedded these words throughout the unit. Word definitions were shared and then practised using call and response. Actions were also used to reinforce terminology and make it memorable.



As the unit developed, we added more and more words to our vocabulary spider diagram to show the links we were making throughout the unit.

The importance of quality, engaging text and class outings

Sourcing good information text about workhouses was central to the unit as illustrated below.

What were workhouses?

Before 1834, poor people were looked after in the parishes where they lived. Money was collected by overseers of the poor from those who owned land and had wealth. This money was used to help those in serious need – the sick, the elderly and the unemployed. Paupers often used the money to stay in their own homes rather than go to a 'poorhouse' where many paupers lived. This was called outdoor relief.

In 1834 a new system was set up to help deal with the poor in Britain. The New Poor Law made parishes group together to form *Poor Law Unions*. A *Board of Guardians* looked after the poor in each union.

From 1834 anyone who needed outdoor relief had to go to a workhouse if they wanted help. Here, paupers slept, ate and worked but to encourage them to go and find work outside they tried to make life as unpleasant as possible. Life inside could be miserable – work hours could be long, food could be poor and punishments could be harsh. But, not everyone hated the workhouses – some thought that the system cost people less, taught paupers how to behave properly made poor people work harder.

The people in charge of the New Poor Law were called Poor Law Commissioners - they produced plans and rules to help the unions to set up workhouses.

History Association: www.history.org.uk/primary/module/2870/interpretation-and-poor-victorian-children/2872/who-was-life-like-for-the-victorian-poor



Understanding gathered from the *What were workhouses?* text above was greatly strengthened by organising an outing to Southwell Workhouse so the children could experience for themselves a day-in-the-life of a pauper. Seeing the building with its prison-like appearance helped build their understanding as did being dressed in the uniform that labelled the children as paupers. Once back at school, it also enabled us to create a display to illustrate what we had learnt.

The children then had the background understanding to be able to meaningfully explore a range of sources of evidence related to the Workhouse.

Source A

A pauper who was found doing any of these things was to be given **only bread and potatoes for two days**:

- Making a noise during silence
- Using bad language
- Threatening to hit another pauper
- Not keeping clean
- Pretending to be sick
- Entering part of the workhouse which was for another class
- Refusing to work
- Playing cards
- Climbing over the workhouse wall
- Misbehaving during church services
- Returning late after an outside visit
- Disobeying an officer of the workhouse

A pauper who did any of these things was to be **locked up for a day**:

- Insulting the master or matron
- Disobeying the master or matron
- Hitting another pauper
- Damaging workhouse property
- Getting drunk
- Causing a disturbance during prayers

Source B

I have this day inspected the schools. The boys answered remarkably well in the Scriptures. Indeed, their religious knowledge would do credit to any school. Their arithmetic is fair and they possess greater knowledge of geography than is usually the case in schools of this description. Their reading is still much below their other attainments and their writing might be improved. I must say that it is impossible for one man to attend properly to a school of 80 boys.

Extract from a school inspector's report on the schools at Gressenhall workhouse, 1849

Source C

"The food was served up with pieces of black stuff floating around. On examination, we discovered it to be rat and mice manure. I called for the chief officer, who said the porridge was good." - *George Lansbury, guardian of Poplar workhouse, of the oatmeal porridge served in 1893.*

Source D

"9th October: Hannah Hickling spent five hours in solitary confinement for using obscene and profane language and annoying other inmates. - 14th November: John Fox and William Crooks had their meat stopped at dinner for fighting." - *Entries in the punishment book for Southwell Workhouse in 1864.*

Boxing up what to write

Children then used their experiences from the visit to Southwell Workhouse and their interpretation of the evidence to begin to consider the question *Was the Workhouse a Place of Hope or Despair?* The class debated the issue in a drama session to help the children vocalise and memorise their understanding. This helped the class establish the two sides of the argument and create this grid to sort their thoughts in response to the question.

Hope	Despair
Families who had nothing would be given a roof over their heads.	Families were split up and rarely saw one another. They had to work to pay their way.
People would be fed 2 meals each day.	Meals were meagre rations. They were the same every week. Paupers could lose their meals if they did something wrong. Weak soup/bread. Rat droppings!
Given a purpose in life. Picking oakum, breaking rocks.	Paupers had to work from 7am to 7pm each day. They weren't allowed to talk. Cheap labour.
All children were educated in reading, writing and arithmetic. They would be taught scripture and attend church on Sunday.	Children could be caned if they did anything wrong. Left-handed children were forced to write with their right hand. If children did not sit up straight, they were made to. There were up to 80 children in a class. Everyone worked in silence.
Paupers were given clothes to wear.	If paupers ran away, they could be accused of stealing as the workhouse owned their clothes.
Paupers learned the difference between right and wrong by following strict rules and expectations.	Rules and punishments were harsh. Paupers could be blamed for something they hadn't done and so might miss the opportunity to be with their family members.

These responses were then incorporated into this boxing-up grid to plan their writing:

Model text	Generalised pattern	Independent application
In our class we have been discussing ...	Introduction in the form of a question	<i>In our History lessons this term, we have been debating whether or not the Workhouse was a place of hope or despair.</i>
Some of the class believe that all children should have to learn cookery ...	Reasons in support	<i>Some of the class believe it was a place of hope and have a number of reasons for suggesting this ... ideas from Hope</i>
On the other hand, there are quite a few people who believe that boys should not bother with cookery ...	Reasons against	<i>On the other hand, there are quite a few people who believe it was a place of despair and have a number of reasons for suggesting this ... ideas from Despair</i>
Finally, having listened to all the arguments that the others have suggested I have made my own mind up ...	Conclusion: evidence to support decision	<i>Finally, having listened to all the arguments that the class have suggested I have made my own mind up ... Choose + use evidence from either Hope or Despair</i>

Children then used the model text to help them orally rehearse their ideas prior to writing so that they had talked the text and were aware of places where points needed to be more clearly expressed or more coherently linked.

Less confident writers were encouraged to “hug closely” to the model text. More able writers offered support to less confident children by modelling the correct sentence structures and patterns through echoing the text, sentence by sentence.

The Talk for Writing imitation, innovation and independent application process has greatly strengthened their ability to write a coherent discussion text in history and they are now able to apply these skills whenever discursive writing is needed across the curriculum.

Some of the work the children produced is below.



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Eliza's response to this task in the Autumn Term of Y5 is above, so that you can read it more easily, there's a typed version below.

Was the workhouse a place of hope or despair?

In our class we have been debating whether or not the workhouse was a place of hope or despair.

Some of the class believe that the workhouse was a place of hope. They have a number of reasons for suggesting this. Their first reason is that they gave paupers opportunities to go to church to pray which helped them with learning about God and build their independence in learning. Another reason is that they kept you safe, protected and sheltered from problems associated with being homeless or poor. Furthermore, they were highly educated for the teachers were strict and encouraged them to better themselves. These people argue that they let paupers have food including Breakfast, lunch and tea. This meant they had loads of energy for the rest of the day.

On the other hand, there are quite a few people in our class who believe that if paupers were with their left, then they would be forced by the master to tie their arms behind the paupers back and learn to write with their right. They argue that the workhouse was bad since families would be permanently separated and could only see each other on Sundays. They also believe the punishments were too strict. It was cruel to perform these on children since they hurt. Some people say the master went too far when handing out punishments to the paupers. They think that the inmates time would be better spent with their kind, loving family, but if they had none it was better than nothing.

From this point on, having listened to the arguments that others have suggested, I have made my own mind up. I believe that the workhouse was a place of despair since the Master and matron were horrible to the paupers. This means that paupers needed to learn to be more thoughtful and respectful - pick-picking others around them. This would mean that paupers have to think for themselves in life for when

Discursive writing was revisited later in the year in a history topic on *Heroes*. A more challenging model text was used to introduce the children to the structure of a balanced argument: arguments and counter arguments were included in each paragraph. The children internalised the more challenging generic discussion phrases, which provided them with a more advanced way of representing a discussion. They were then able to apply these features independently in their own work, drawing upon their historical knowledge and understanding, as illustrated in this piece by Eliza in the summer term of Y5.

Was Robert Falcon Scott a Hero?



There is a great deal of debate about whether Robert Falcon Scott was a hero or not.

Some people believe that he was a national hero. They argue that Robert Falcon Scott was brave and courageous. He was only young when he commanded his first expedition to Antarctica. Although this was unsuccessful, he was one of the first people to explore the interior of this harsh, hostile and unfamiliar environment. Moreover, Scott remained determined. He did not allow Roald Amundsen's challenge to discourage

him; instead it spurred him forward towards his objective.

However, other people claim that Robert Falcon Scott wasn't a hero because he didn't listen to advice. He knew he needed loads of food to eat and water to drink but he was focused on winning the race. As soon as he heard Roald Amundsen was trying to get to Antarctica he rushed and wasn't prepared. He died of starvation and didn't prepare as well as he could have done. The expedition came to an unsuccessful, disastrous end.

Another argument often put in favour of his heroic actions state that he was a hero for he inspired people all around the world. He taught people to believe in themselves and to never give up. He had courage and determination to never stop. Scott had bravery in him. I'm sure one time he wanted to give up but he had his crew and everyone in the world.

Wasn't a hero because he had been there before, therefore should have learnt from his mistakes. (Food, clothing and awareness of the hostile environment.) They were all sure in the interior of harsh and arctic habitat. So he knew he needed to take more food and equipment to cope with the arduous environmental conditions. If he had done it, it would have been a success.

Finally, having listening to all the suggestions that people have suggested, I have made my own mind up. I believe that he isn't a hero because he cared about himself not his team. This means that he is a selfish and foolish person to be friends with. It would mean I would never be friends and hope fully no one will make that mistake or decision like that.

In Year 6, the children once again wrote discursively in history. This time, they considered whether or not to allow Howard Carter to open the tomb of Tutankhamen. Children were encouraged to write in role as a government official and adopt a more formal register, features that were illustrated by the model text. Once again, historical understanding and interpretation shaped this piece. This is Eliza's writing in Y6:

Should Howard Carter open the tomb?



Government officials have been considering whether Howard Carter should open the tomb of the young Pharaoh that has been lost for thousands of years. We have been discussing important issues with opening the tomb. This week we are focusing on Howard Carter the archaeologist - whether he should be allowed to enter the tomb of King Tutankhamun.

For those who are campaigning whether or not Howard Carter should have entered the tomb, have put forward a number of reasons for powerful arguments that need to be carefully considered before making a decision about his entry. First of all, they make the valid point that Howard Carter is a foreigner, he is not an

egyptian. Therefore the contents of the tomb are nothing to do with him - he should leave it well alone. Many people would consider that he has worked tirelessly for many years to discover the whereabouts of the tomb - he and his workers would be devastated should they not be allowed in. Furthermore, if the tomb is opened the dramatic change in temperature will affect the environmental conditions and therefore have disastrous consequences for the delicate artefacts. Moreover, thieves may steal and raid this tomb. This would cause great controversy for the people of Egypt. Finally, it should be remembered that this is an incredible once in a lifetime opportunity to discover an unopened tomb - exactly as it was left 3000 years ago.

On the other hand, there are many who believe that Howard Carter knew exactly what he was doing whereas the Egyptians knew nothing about the tomb of the young Pharaoh. Not only did the waterway not get finished but he had to work night and day for the egyptologist

that wouldn't have found the steps to the sarcophagus without him. Furthermore they suggest that many tombs have already been opened so it is unnecessary to open yet another. Finally they state that Egyptologists need to discover more about the life of the Egyptians.

Having viewed the matter with some care, we have finally made a decision that he will be allowed to have access to the tomb only with strict conditions that apply to everyone that wants to look at Tutankhamun's body. Despite the idea of thieves the artefacts will be numbered and inspected every night before the sun goes down at night.