TEACHING ENGLISH CREATIVELY

Good Readers Make Good Writers

A Booklet on the Craft of Writing

Pie Corbett

© Pie Corbett 2026

01 Good Readers make Good Writers

Readers and Writers love words. They enjoy the sound and texture of language. Writers often talk about another writer's sentences with envy -- indeed, the plot may well be a secondary consideration because it is not so much what is written but 'how' that catches a writer's attention. They love language. If children do not enjoy words and sentences then let us not be surprised if they do not like writing or reading. Working with schools recently, where we have surveyed children's attitudes to literacy, it has been quite common to discover that where standards are low and progress is slow, children do not like writing -- indeed, some hate it.

Of course, readers and writers also enjoy the secondary world that writing can induce -- a form of guided daydreaming that can absorb and inform our lives in powerful ways.

I believe that teachers should be the guardians of our language, taking pleasure in the well-turned phrase, crafted argument and the well-told tale. The teaching has to stimulate an interest in words and sentences because they lie at the root of all writing. A writer needs a facility with language and that is one reason why poetry matters. It is the starting place for teaching writing because when writing poetically, children learn how to craft language in short, manageable chunks.

Poetic writing tends to be brief and is the domain where children can learn to put their fear of failing at writing to one side, to play with words and capture what matters in their lives. Poetry is also important because it is about words. Words matter because that is where a very young child begins, by using words to label the world and bring it into being.

In poetry, words fall under the mind's microscope - for each word counts. Children should start school being introduced to traditional rhymes and songs. Each year the bank of rhymes and poems should gradually build up till they have acquired a store of images, ideas, and an ear for language.

Now, this idea of building a repertoire of reading inside a child's mind is crucial -- not just in poetry -- because the most proficient writers in any class are always readers. This is not because they necessarily have a particular talent, though some may have an inclination as a writer. It is because through avid reading, they have acquired an internal bank of images and ideas (a living library of poems, stories and nonfiction) as well as linguistic patterns that they then draw upon when writing, mingling it with their own lives and what they imagine or know for themselves. All writers give the same advice -- if you want to be a writer then, *'read, read, read'.*

Some teachers may feel that the children are not sufficiently 'imaginative'. The issue is usually nothing to do with a lack of imagination -- indeed, to be human means to have imagination -- but generally, it is to do with either a lack of reading or that the child does not know how to draw on their internal bank of reading and experience to create something new. A large part of a writer's imagination is built through reading.

Imagination is the ability to form mental images, ideas, or concepts not currently present to the senses, which may act as the seed of thought. Creativity is the application of what is imagined to produce something fresh, valuable or of interest, bringing those ideas into reality. Imagination is thinking; creativity is the doing. Imagination may involve dreaming the impossible; creativity involves making the impossible possible. Imagination is strengthened through subjects such as art, dance, drama and close observation.

If children are read to at home, then they arrive in school with a considerable advantage as potential young writers. They have already been through years of being read to -- or having an oral story told -- and therefore have acquired the habit of imagining. They know how to sit and listen, seeing what is happening in their minds. They will also, through mere repetition of favourite stories, have acquired certain linguistic patterns that they may then be in the habit of using when playing at making up their own stories. It is worth remembering that at this early stage of language acquisition, the stories are 'heard' by the child who is being read to or having a story told. Language is rapidly absorbed in this way through the ear -- and it is why young children in primary schools must have a daily 'story time' session.

One of the extraordinary things that young children do who are read to is that they pass through a phase where they demand the same story again and again. This is usually around the age of 2 or 3 years old. Every parent who has read to children will recognise this because it can become quite tedious for the adult reader to have to plough through some dull book for the 30th time! Now all children round the world do the same thing -- as long as they have the opportunity. So it must be a significant part of cognitive and language development. Well, we can only guess what happens to the young mind but it does seem logical to suggest that in some way the human brain needs narrative patterns. Neuroscientists do believe that we understand the world through a sort of inner story architecture. We move through life experiencing the world through our senses. In order to understand what is happening, we create billions of little stories to explain the world to ourselves and ourselves to the world.

Intriguingly, children who pass through this phase also learn the repeated tale word for word. We know this because if you try and avoid a bit in order to end the tale sooner, they get very cross with you because you are, 'telling it wrong'. In other words, they learn the story. I remember noticing with my own children that some of the words and phrases would then reappear in their everyday play as if they were revisiting the story and adapting it to new circumstances -- they were raiding their reading to become creators of something new!

It is worth noting that it is not the 'book' that matters. Children who come from oral traditions also follow the same pattern of demanding a story relentlessly until it is well known. The issue for many of us as teachers is that so many children arrive in school without such a bank of tales -- either literary tales or indeed what one might term 'family stories' where incidents from everyday life have been turned into a tale. In some schools, the large majority of children have not been read to on a regular basis before they start school. These children are already behind.

We know from Gordon Well's research in Bristol (*The Meaning Makers: Children learning language and using language to learn, Portsmouth NH. Heinemann, 1986*), and the research of many others, that there is a strong link between being read to and success in school. Being read to not only provides an imaginative and linguistic bank but also helps children develop abstract

thought and therefore provides a gateway into conceptual development across the curriculum. Most language children meet in the everyday hurly burly of life is in the here and now -- but as soon as you start to tell a story then the brain has to start imagining. Constant exercising of the imagination helps to develop this ability to form abstract concepts early in life. Of course, language acquisition also helps the child to label and manipulate ideas, enabling higher order thinking and expression.

Another feature of avid young readers -- indeed all readers -- is that they latch onto an author and read everything by that person. Readers love a series. I can recall slowing down towards the end of the 'Narnia' books because I didn't want them to end. I read the last book very slowly, even taking the final chapter page by page! Now, it is very noticeable in children's writing that when a child reads an author avidly, you can often see the same concerns, ideas, incidents and flow of language in their own writing. As a child, I read Enid Blyton and so my writing tended to be in the same vein, packed with caves and steaming mugs of hot cocoa (neither of which featured in my real life).

So, the reading is part of shaping the writer that children may become. Over time, the young reader shifts from author to author, sometimes finding a series of books to absorb them. In some sort of linguistic and imaginative osmosis, they begin to inherit aspects of these writers' styles. The trouble with this is that if children were to read an overdose of Blyton then their writing might become stuck in a similar vein. Meagre reading produces thin writing. In other words, it is worth making sure that children experience a rich and varied reading diet.

Years ago, I interviewed children about the influence of reading on writing. Why does the reading matter? One boy told me that the reading mattered because then you knew if your writing was any good. The reading is the yardstick that you hold your own writing up against. In other words, reading helps us to internalise patterns that we can use in our writing but it also helps us to revise our writing, to judge whether it is effective. If we only ever read potboilers then the likelihood is that that is what we would be satisfied with in our own writing. The reading becomes the acid test -- it feeds the writing like a living thesaurus as well as becoming the writer's touchstone.

The language that we learn tends to be language that is both repeated and memorable. Children need to experience memorable books that will loiter in the mind. As a child, I read the Beano and my fair share of trashy novels but I was also lucky enough to read some books that stayed with me. Interestingly, all those Enid Blyton books passed the time of day but they did not really influence my mind. I cannot recall the plots other than a generic sense of adventure. However, great books are memorable and seem to loiter in the mind forever. For instance, even after over 50 years I can still picture the soporific bunnies in Mr MaGregor's garden. Therefore, as teachers, it seems worth considering which great picture books, poems, stories and novels we might read to children -- for the love of a great tale but also to build their imaginative and linguistic repertoire as young writers.

When children come into school, many children are just about to start their reading journey. The National Literacy Trust annual survey shows a decline in bedtime reading suggesting that only 41% of parents read to their pre-school children frequently. If these children are to become writers, they will need to build that bank of favourites rapidly, so that they too can build up their repertoire of stories and develop the capacity to imaginatively enter another world. Teachers will need to loiter with different poems, stories and information books so that the children begin to wonder, recreate and internalise narrative patterns of language and image.

Of course, reading begins with appreciation -- enjoying a story as an experience. Teachers will also want to revisit some stories in different ways -- through art, dance, song, model making, drama, retelling, discussion -- in many different ways - to help the children inhabit the world of the tale, deepening their understanding and enjoyment. Children who have English as a new language, and those who struggle, will especially need to meet stories, poems and information books in this way, otherwise they may never really understand what the words mean. And, of course, such deep reading also develops a key aspect of becoming a writer -- the ability to imaginatively concentrate, entering another world.

The other thing to say about a good book is that it can act as a catalyst to writing. A good book makes you want to invent your own. Writers often say, *'I wish I had written that'* and that is a feeling that children share when they are retelling a story -- the desire to make it their own.

It does seem too that certain poems, stories and piece of non-fiction work especially effectively as catalysts for children's writing. The terms 'mentor' or 'model' text describes a text that the teacher uses to refer to and draw upon when teaching writing. The idea is simple enough. Some stories, for instance, are very handy for acting as a model for children's own writing. It is a simple enough notion that a few key texts might be used each year as common reference points for teaching writing.

02 Good Writers Read as Writers

In some primary schools, children love writing. However, research from the National literacy trust suggests that writing enjoyment has reached a historic low, with only about 3 in 10 children aged 8 to 18 enjoy writing in their free time. However, early primary (ages 5--8) see significantly higher engagement, with nearly 62% enjoying it before enthusiasm typically declines with age. However, children who write for fun, find it highly rewarding for relaxation, creativity, and self-expression. By contrast, writing in most lessons has little to do with self-expression or creativity. Core issues are

- **Expecting Perfection:** an overemphasis on immediate, lawless spelling, punctuation, and handwriting can make writing feel like a chore rather than a creative outlet.
- **Writing by Grammar:** being taught how to write through grammar rather than composition.
- **Success Criteria:** lists of grammar to be used with little reference to creating an effect on the reader.
- **Lack of Choice:** when children are assigned rigid topics, they often struggle to find personal relevance or interest in what they are producing.

Too many children do not enjoy writing. Now this may be for various reasons. Perhaps there is an overemphasis on testing and this has become the main reason for writing -- we don't write to tell a story, create a satisfying poem or to get a job done -- we write to be told how to improve and to be tested. The rigmarole of SATs assessments may have begun as a measure to see how well children and schools are doing but they have become so crucial in a school's standing that they are now the main target.... and targets by their nature can be limiting and dispiriting for all.

Maybe children have learned that they cannot write because they struggle with spelling or have shoddy handwriting. Maybe they believe that this is what writing is all about -- neatness and accuracy. The first port of call in developing young writers has to be building a sense of pleasure,

confidence and motivation. We write because it matters to us personally. Nothing much else will follow without this condition, other than dull compliance.

The teacher of writing sets about the business of gradually developing the children's repertoire as writers. The focus has to be on teaching composition so that children acquire the ability to generate, organise, develop and polish their ponderings into writing. The craft of writing has to be taught. Children who write well have developed the ability to draw on their lives and their reading. They raid their reading to create.

But writers are also alert to the world. They are constantly on the lookout for writing 'possibilities' perhaps in a more conscious manner than those who do not write. They see the world as their source for ideas both looking and experiencing life perhaps more deeply than others, adept at noticing the significance of details and particularities that might bring an occasion alive. They read the world to inform their writing. For instance, if I was writing a story about an old lady pottering in her kitchen, I could use my mother's kitchen -- complete with the old table that her cats use as a scratching post - so much so that one leg looks thinner than the others! Writers use their real experiences to bring their writing alive and make it real. They feed off their world.

Betsy Byars calls her experiences 'writing scraps'. She consciously collects unusual and interesting events, places and characters that might feature at some point in her writing. In other words, not everything has to be made up afresh. Imagination is about manipulating what you already know. Writers observe acutely. They read the world with a writerly eye, seeking what might make 'good copy'.

Writers are curious about their world -- they notice details, how people behave and are constantly alert to the possibilities that the world offers. They do not just let life drift by but observe more closely, more intently because everything that happens is potential material. This does not mean that writers have experienced 'deep and meaningful' events. It is often the small details, the little moments that are of best use -- a funny expression that Grandma uses or the way the hamster hangs upside down in its cage. It is the everyday that not only makes our stories

sound real but also triggers the reader's imagination. Being an observer is central to becoming a writer.

Young writers who read will imitate their reading without really realising it. They reach for a well-known character or event because that is what is in their minds. However, as they move through primary schools, the teacher can direct the children to read as a writer in a more explicit manner. A bank of well-known stories, poems, teacher texts or information books may become the class's 'model' texts and be used explicitly to teach the craft of writing. Perhaps only a few such books are needed but they become a touchstone that may often be recalled and referred to during shared writing.

These 'model' texts teach writing by example. They might show how a setting is used to create atmosphere or how a character develops over time or an argument builds. At first, such books are experienced and enjoyed for themselves but then may be returned to in a different light to see what can be learned from them to influence our writing. We reread with a writer's curiosity - perhaps there are approaches here that we can use in our own writing. I remember my own children dancing in front of the television copying dancers. Perhaps becoming a writer is rather like that -- seeing how someone else creates powerful writing and then doing the same sort of thing. The writing begins as a form of creative imitation where young writers impersonate a writer they enjoy, adopting their mantle for a while.

As children develop the ability to 'read as a writer', this begins to become a habit. They read more attentively, noticing how writers create effects. Such an incidental habit leads children into using their everyday 'free' reading as a potential source for their writing. It rapidly begins to increase the bank of language as well as writing possibilities to draw upon. This is not just a matter of 'grammar spotting'. Writing ideas and approaches are gathered, often with examples, and these can be displayed or noted in children's writing journals or 'magpie books'.

Many classrooms are adorned with bits of grammar. No amount of writing rules and grammar reminders will necessarily help -- and may make writing harder. No writer -- ever -- wrote with lists of grammar to be shoe-horned into their writing. Writers focus on composition. However,

attentive reading of beautiful writing and explicit discussion where we think together as writers may act as a bridge from the reading into the writing.

This link from reading into writing should be immediate. We pause on a passage of suspense writing. This can be reread and discussed to consider how the writer managed to build the tension. We may notice how the writer isolated the main character in a dark place and then introduced a sound effect with ominous connotations, which the main character reacted to showing fear. We can consider the use of some short sentences for drama balanced by longer ones to delay revealing what made the sound. The teacher moves from such explicit reading as a writer into listing such techniques or 'writing tools', annotating the model. The sample under scrutiny remains in front of the children and then the teacher uses shared writing to work with the children, creating a similar suspense paragraph. The children then write their own version, possibly using mini whiteboards so that paragraphs may be edited and worked on with a response partner.

It is worth writing key paragraphs up onto large cards that can be kept with the relevant 'toolkit' (writing techniques). These can then be reused whenever writing narrative. The sample can be written into children's journals so that they can refer back. This sort of teaching helps to develop children's knowledge about writing -- how writers create different effects. But there is more to writing than having such 'writerly knowledge' -- there are writing processes and skills that have to be developed.

For instance, a poet may play with words and ideas or learn how to intently enter an experience, looking as closely as possible, drawing on all the senses as well as memory, thought, association and feeling. This absorption in the act of creating is a skill that can be developed and is essential to this type of writing. But it is more than that -- for the poet not only has to become absorbed but also develop the skill of generating words and phrases to capture the experience -- it is a generative and judgemental process. They rapidly generate words and then judge which fits best. But poetry is more than a cognitive activity -- the writer has to listen to the conjunction between the meaning and the music of the words. How does it flow and do the sounds echo or add to the

meaning. Poets tend to mutter their words aloud for part of the writing is in listening to the poem as it develops. In that way, they capture the music and the flow of a poem's inner regularity. The sound of the poem is part of the physical quality of the poem.

Now the way we might tackle a poem is very different to writing an argument. In this sort of writing, ideas and evidence have to be gathered and then organised to the best effect, considering how the audience might be persuaded. Counter arguments will need addressing. The point is that writers have to have a range of processes for different types of writing in the same way that readers have to approach different types of reading in different ways.

Writers are usually addicted to reading. Reading is their lifeblood but it can be daunting. Indeed, many people who want to write find it hard because after several pages they begin to look back and feel dissatisfied with what they have written. It just doesn't match up against all the good books that they have ever read. So, they give up. The world is jammed with novels that never got past the first chapter! Young writers who wish to write are well advised to put their inner critics to one side and remember that you don't have to 'get it right but just get it written'. Getting it 'right' can happen after the first draft. As you compose, the brain needs to cast its full attention onto the flow of composition with as little interference as possible from worrying about spelling and handwriting or whether they have used a fronted adverbial.

Reading deeply also puts images and feelings into the mind, as the story is recreated. Writers see beyond this and begin to look beneath the surface trying to see the writer at work, noticing the rhythm of the sentences, the choice of words, the structure of a story. All of this complexity influences the writer. Of course, children who read avidly seem to absorb story images and language patterns that they draw upon when writing. However, this can be made more conscious by teaching with the class considering how writing works and learning how to draw on their reading to inform their writing.

03 Good Writers Read Avidly

In any class, the most proficient writers are readers. This is always true. In fact, I would go as far as saying that it is impossible to write any text type without experience of reading that text type. In the same way that it is impossible to speak German, without hearing German being spoken.

Constant reading helps us to internalise language patterns. The more we read, the more embedded the patterns. The broader we read, the wider our frame of reference. The bigger the storehouse in the mind, the easier writing becomes....as long as the writer knows how to draw on their reading and utilise it effectively. Of course, it is not the whole story because our writing is also influenced by our own experiences and psychological obsessions.

At first, children's writing is often imitative because their reading diet is narrow and they therefore draw on a slim range of patterns. Their writing is so similar to their reading that it is really a form of copying. For instance, as a student, I fell in thrall of Sylvia Plath and my own poems became loaded with moons, blood, cuts, bees and all the Plath paraphernalia including the short punchy line and the dramatic gasp of a stumbling metaphorical list. Narrow reading leaves the writer potentially trapped in a phase of what may appear to be 'copying' rather than creating.

> *'If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants'. Isaac Newton*

A fledgling writer therefore needs many influences to find their own voice. Of course, the influence of our reading is always there but gradually we begin to discover a unique way of saying things -- better shaped by multitudinous reading and encouragement to experiment with different voices in order to find our own.

So, it may seem that the answer to developing young writers in school has to be making sure that they read plenty and read widely. I wonder though whether they should also read very attentively? Is there some way in which my style of reading actually helped me internalise patterns more powerfully than others which has helped me write?

- Was it that when reading, I have a tendency to mutter the words almost aloud so that I do not just hear them in my head but also voice them aloud therefore making the patterns more memorable?
- Is it because I was read to as a child and in school reading aloud by the teacher was a regular feature -- so that I have ***[heard]{.underline}*** the tune of good prose?
- Or was it that because I enjoyed writing, I was more aware of recreating the narrative in my mind -- I was somehow meeting the written word as a writer and creating the story more powerfully and lastingly in my mind?
- Was it that I engaged so deeply and recreated the story so potently in my imagination that the images still stay there, waiting to be revisited and drawn upon in my writing?
- Or was it that I was reading with a 'writerly' eye and ear -- with a specific view as to what might be useful for my own writing?
- Or was it that when writing, I was just better able to recall a written style and reuse it?

> *'Even before we know we will be writers, our reading is a part of our preparation for writing... Every book, story, every sentence we read is a part of our preparation.' Joyce Carol Oates.*

Children will implicitly internalise language patterns and reuse them in their writing, if they read a lot or read repetitively or are read a regular 'bedtime' of 'class' story. This can be made increasingly explicit in order to develop the habit of reading with a 'writerly' eye and a writer's curiosity, wondering, *'how did the author do that? Because in a minute, we are going to attempt*

the same sort of thing....'. In this sense, it is reading with a view to imitating the underlying patterns and themes used by a writer but also thinking about what can be learned about writing. This sort of attentive reading, that consciously looks at the crafting of writing, can help children see how other writers have handled writing, especially useful when considering something difficult that a child would like to attempt.

Begin by reading deeply

Of course, we begin by reading for pleasure, to feed the imagination. But reading that skims the surface, chasing the plot will not influence the writing. Writers read deeply. Deep reading plays an important role in heightening the ability to imagine. The stronger the engagement, the more powerfully a reader lives inside the story, the more the imaginative store is increased.

When a reader enters a story and sees it inside their minds in a powerful and lasting manner so that it stays there for years, this develops the ability to imagine - an essential ingredient of most writing. This sort of intense reading prepares the young writer with the imaginative faculties for writing -- the ability to 'see' and 'live' the story, poem or non-fiction they are creating.

Move on to Reading as a Writer

> *'When I'm reading I look for good words and ideas. I look at writing from all angles.' John Mainwaring, 10 years old.*

Once that sort of intense reading is finished -- once a story, poem or non-fiction text has been discussed, acted, painted.... then there may be space to consider the words from a 'writerly' angle.... both what makes it effective and alternatively, possibly just as useful, what makes something a bad piece of writing (it is easier to spot other people's weaknesses than our own because we are reading as a reader rather than as the writer).

This sort of reading can help the writer tease out the 'big' themes, ideas and underlying text patterns. It also draws attention the building blocks of texts such as characterisation or how an argument builds. It helps the writer consider how paragraphs carry weight, how sentences vary to create impact and words are chosen to make writing powerful. It draws attention to the handling of imagery as well as tactics for binding texts together.

Then -- How was the Writing Made?

Those of us who took degrees or A levels in English are used to coming to a text in 'critic' mode, to consider a story as a completed object. However, 'reading as a writer' involves considering how the story is 'made' as well as the processes that developed the writing. So, the reading can help us understand how effects are created, developing a 'writer's knowledge'. What also needs to be revealed during shared writing are the thought processes that occur 'before', 'during' and 'after' writing -- articulating a writer's 'skills' and 'procedures'. We need to look beneath the surface to think about the writer at work and learn how to draw upon our reading to create different effects whilst considering the audience and purpose. In this way, a good writer looks over their shoulder to draw on their reading whilst looking forward down the road to see where they are going and what needs to be done to arrive.

> *'I suspect many writers read books the way mechanics look at cars, with an eye to what is going on under the bonnet.'** Paul Muldoon, The Sunday Times, 4 October 1998.*

Over the years, this process of considering reading with a view to seeing what can be learned as a writer has been referred to as 'getting under the car bonnet' of writing -- to see how it works. This makes good sense -- though it can lead to lists of rules about varying sentences or using particular structures in order to make progress. When I was at school, I was told that to pass the eleven plus I had to use 2 adjectives to every noun. Do that and you'll pass, they told me. I did

and I didn't! The writer's focus should be on the flow of composition, crafting the language to create effects -- build a character, develop an argument, entertain a younger child.

Giving a young writer too many things to be thinking about while composing may actually make the process harder. Too many rules makes writing demanding -- a form of formula fulfilling rather than creation! That is why plenty of reading is needed and plenty of practice so that patterns are internalised and just become second nature. Writers are thieves -- both consciously and subconsciously.

The other issue to consider is that the thinking needs to be done by the children -- just dishing out lists and frames does not necessarily help children deepen understanding of writing nor does it help them develop the habit of reading in a writerly manner. Constant problem-solving is a powerful approach to use because the children are expected to work out ideas for themselves, even if at first their ideas are simplistic:

- What sort of effect is being created?
- How does the writing achieve this?

Finally, it cannot be stressed too much that this is about the children thinking about the link between the effect the writer creates and how this has been achieved. It is not just a matter of 'spotting grammar'. It is about beginning to think and behave like a writer -- making choices and considering their impact on the reader. So, the effective writer shifts from being the writer into reviewing what has been written as the 'reader'. Of course, the more the teacher models this sort of behaviour, the more the children are able to think in this way, drawing on their reading to inform their writing.

A Word of Warning

Writing narrative is not just an imitative activity, drawn solely from reading. Writers draw on all their experiences as a source for their writing. By experience I mean both their outer and inner life. Children will refer to their daily life, holidays, school and so on as part of their writing -- but

they will also draw on their inner world -- thoughts, feelings, interests and dreams. They will visit what disturbs them, drawing on psychological issues - their passions, obsessions, fads, fears and inclinations. Much of this will happen implicitly though sometimes it may be obvious to an adult reader who knows the child. My mother's mother died when she was 4 years old and later on she wrote a story called 'The book of the dead' which featured a motherless child seeking happiness. Sometimes psychological concerns appear as metaphors in children's writing and are less obvious.

When children write, they will inevitably be drawing on the patterns from their reading but they must also acquire the habit of imagining what will happen next. This particular form of daydreaming helps the story to emerge scene by scene. Some of this will be an echo picked up from their reading. So a word, phrase, sentence or image suggests something that has been read before and the child follows a familiar pattern. Alternatively, new ideas appear or characters have been so strongly imagined that they seem to take on a life of their own. The writer wonders what might happen next and therefore creates possibilities. The reader in the writer helps to sift these through, deciding what will work and what will not.

So writing is not then just a matter of copying reading. The writer has to draw on other experiences and interests, as well as the ability to imagine. How this happens often cannot be rationally explained. What we do know is that reading fuels writing by building the capacity to imagine as well as providing a huge store of creative possibilities. If writing was just imitative of reading then new stories would never emerge and whilst there are common patterns, new strains of old forms constantly emerge.

04 Good Writers and Planning

Of course, writing begins in having something to say that matters -- this may be the pleasure to be found in playing with words, the desire to capture an experience, a good story to tell or a piece of fascinating information to pass on or the need to get a job done. Good writing centres around the dynamic relationship between the writer, their audience and the world they inhabit -- both real and imagined.

The only reason that I am sitting here on a sunny summer's morning is because I hope that in writing this essay then maybe I can contribute to our joint endeavour to help more children become confident writers. It is the sense of audience and purpose that are actually driving me to write. Now every teacher knows that audience and purpose is important. But the reality is that the majority of teachers pay little attention to using purpose as a driving force to motivate writers.

The teacher is usually the main audience for children's writing. We need to come to children's writing as an interested and supportive reader rather than someone who growls and spits from the margin, chiding them over their hopeless immaturity. The reason for writing in too many classes is to do well in tests, to gain a 'level' rather than to communicate what matters. If we want thoughtful, creative and motivated young writers then we have to work in classrooms as writers, helping them think and behave like a writer, internalising and manipulating patterns to develop their own voice about their own concerns. Progress and attainment will then look after themselves. Growing up cannot always be rushed.

So, as writers we all work best where there is a driving purpose and an audience that matters to us, especially when writing non-fiction. The purpose and audience will determine the content, style and organisation of the writing. Having said that, on many occasions young children actually write to please themselves. Poems and stories are written for the pleasure of creating. Non-fiction is often written to capture and organise interesting information. Where good writing flourishes, the teacher is careful in choosing interesting and engaging topics for writing (objects,

animals, art work, dance, drama, video) that stimulate interest and provide the children with something to say and a motivation for communicating. If the subject is dull or out of a child's experience or interest then the writing will be pedestrian.

All writers have to pass through a stage of mulling over what to say. Children can be taught different strategies to help them generate ideas. Whole texts do not leap into the brain fully formed. Ideas have to be gathered, nurtured, talked through, drawn out so they can be considered -- and gradually developed. Occasionally this happens rapidly. Sometimes it takes a long time -- and then whilst children are writing, other ideas that may be useful will also arrive -- often unbidden. In this case, any plan becomes a flexible working tool rather than a rigid template.

Many writers like to launch in and get on with writing but this is not always a good idea for the inexperienced. Too soon the writing may fizzle out. It is worth spending time to mull over ideas, gather research, draw and doodle, talk ideas through, mutter away in your mind and even daydream to imagine where a story might lead. These sorts of early activities that help to generate some possibilities vary, depending on the type of writing and on the inclination of the writer. Some of us like to plan and others like to leap in.

Young writers usually find it helpful to gather ideas and have some time to sort these out before starting. The quality of preparation often determines what happens in the writing. It is also worth adding that over preparation can kill the writing. As one child said to me once, ruefully looking at his plan that was crammed with ideas, 'what's the point in writing it now, I know what's going to happen.' The excitement of writing is that it enables you to discover and create something that you did not know existed.

Ideas for writing can develop and be given shape by talking them through with a partner. Drawing maps and skeletons and flow charts as well as listing key points or ideas are all useful ways of beginning to organise early thoughts into a plan. Poems may start with a brainstorm of ideas. A discussion might begin with listing of pros and cons. Stories often start with a character who has a problem. Some writers prefer to nail the content before starting to write whilst others use the

act of writing as a way of discovering the story. Children who 'follow their nose' may find themselves having to revise because without an overall pattern, they risk ending lost up an alleyway with no way of ending the story! On the other hand, writers who launch in may be more likely to allow the characters to take over the story with new events, twists and turns happening.

David Almond writes in this vein -- through the writing, the story takes shape. However, young children may best be advised to at least start with some simple, strong underlying pattern or idea. Stories, for instance, are not like life, which rambles on. They have a definite direction and the events lead towards that end. Pausing during writing to review where they are, returning to the plan and adjusting can be handy techniques. Young writers also benefit hugely from orally rehearsing their story or information before writing. This gives a chance for oral revision, to bring ideas into sentences and 'have a go' before committing to the act of writing.

In this way stories can grow and be refined by retelling, arguments may be rehearsed and shaped, recounts and reports presented -- all prior to writing. Paired work provides an instant audience and feedback, which the solitary writer does not have -- until the text is finished.... And by then it is too late! The books are gathered in.... to be *'marked'!*

05 Good Writers Craft Writing

'Shared writing' lies at the heart of teaching writing. This is the generic term for actually writing with and in front of the children as a precursor to the class writing. It is the key moment at which writing is taught. Teachers who do not do shared writing are not teaching writing. It would be rather like saying that you wanted the children to play the flute but you were not going to show them how!

In shared writing the teacher may use two key approaches.

1. **Demonstration (I do)** -- this is where the teacher shows the children how to do something in writing that is new, difficult and will help the children make progress. The teacher writes in front of the children on a board, explaining what is happening. It is rather like giving a running commentary, revealing the decisions that are being made. It is like witnessing a writer's brain at work.

This has to be well focused and fairly brisk so that it holds attention. It is worth loitering mainly on the key aspects that need teaching otherwise it can become too full of 'useful comments' that actually cloud what the teacher wants to highlight. It is not an opportunity to show off technical knowledge. Using coloured pens to make certain aspects stand out is a useful tactic. As the teacher writes, the children can offer comments and suggestions so that they too become engaged as writers.

Now some teachers are afraid of this but really it is nothing too fancy and is well within the reach of all teachers. After all, if you work at key stage 1 then all we need is to write at the same level of a 7 year old. I grant you that year 6 demands that we write in a sophisticated way but most teachers now have degrees! You do not have to be Charles Dickens to do this. Indeed, the straightforward and direct involvement as a writer may well be more powerful than a teacher who shows off, chucking in all sorts of complex technicalities.

2. **Joint Composition**: - this next technique is very similar except the children are almost totally involved with the teacher scribing the children's ideas publicly.

The teacher is writing down what is said on a class board, but also reminding, prompting and challenging so that the writing remains focused. Children are challenged to think of alternatives -- to generate ideas and then test them out to see if they work. The teacher will draw the children's attention to the reading model/ mentor text and aspects may be imitated. The class

'fish' for words, pause and select what seems to work best, orally rehearsing suggestions and adapting till the writing flows.

The teacher works from the plan into the writing. Children generate ideas and then judge their effectiveness. What ends up on the board has to be the best that the teacher can elicit from the children (in the same way, when the children write their own version independently, what they end up with on their page has to be the best that they can find within themselves). The pace will need to be brisk but have pauses for 'thinking time'. On some occasions, a model or mentor text may be referred back to in order to check a certain technique or 'writing tool'. Children use their journals to jot down ideas, for the teacher can only use one idea at a time and in shared writing a veritable storm of ideas should be generated. These can be 'magpied' and jotted down for use by the children or a teaching assistant.

- **Demonstration** -- I'll show you how to do something.
- **Joint composition** -- now we'll have a go together.
- **Guided writing --** I'll support you in a small, focused group.
- **Independent writing** -- you have a go on your own.

Occasionally, the teacher pauses and the writing is reread to listen for the flow and to help the text move forwards. We read back to help us write on.

The class begin with an elegant plan. As the writing emerges, hundreds of decisions are being made which hinge around the children generating words, testing them out, abandoning and

reselecting until the sentences and paragraphs begin to flow with power. The writer's mind is constantly buzzing with thoughts -- does it work? What would the reader think? Do the sentences flow into each other? Do the paragraphs link? What needs to be done next?

Insecurities creep in. Ideas appear. All of this decision-making may be spoken aloud so the children hear the inner thoughts of a writer at work. In turn, this is so that eventually as they are writing, the children can use similar processes themselves. Gradually the teacher steps back so that the children take on more and more, moving from dependence to independence as young writers.

However, writing is not just a matter of technique. The imagination is at work in all types of writing and it is an interesting and necessary partner to the process. Sometimes ideas will just pop into the mind with no rhyme or reasons or logical explanation as to how they came about. They just present themselves with no obvious or explicit thinking process behind them.

Furthermore, sometimes one cannot explain why one thing sounds better than another no more than I can explain why I like Marmite. Too much analysis and explanation by the teacher can spoil the flow of joint composition. Ideally, it should have a breathless sense of excitement as it moves forwards with the text emerging. The key is to encourage the children to suggest ideas, test them out and then press on. The teacher has to be the gatekeeper of quality.

Nothing shoddy is accepted. The teacher also reminds the children of the key features that they need to use in order to ensure progress.

Probably the most difficult part of Shared Writing for teachers is to reveal the 'imagining process' -- creating and seeing the story in the mind. Of course, working from the plan helps but it is also useful to pause and talk through how you imagine or 'see' a scene.

All of this, in the hands of a skilled teacher, generates excitement as the story or text emerges. It fires up the children's own imagination as the talk that surrounds the writing generates many inventive possibilities. It also models the fierce concentration that a writer needs to enter the world of the developing text. In this meditative state, the writer fishes for words, abandons a

track, doubles back and re-imagines. The story is seen in the mind and translated into words or the line of an argument blossoms and grows. It is during this sort of concentrated moment when the writer puts both the experience and the words under their vision, using both sides of the brain to create and to control.

These complex writing processes eventually become increasingly well-orchestrated, internalised and automatic through constant teaching especially where such processes are articulated. It is through saying difficult things aloud that helps us all in the end to be able to say them silently in our heads. Eventually, the children hear the questions they need to ask and aspects of writing such as choosing a powerful verb become an automatic part of their writing repertoire. They find that they can hold an internal dialogue with themselves about the choices available and consider how effective a particular word or phrase will be, or how well their writing reads. Writing processes have to become automatic habits.

The writing classroom becomes a community of writers so that children learn in a collaborative and supportive context. The thinking processes of composition are constantly externalised so that in the end they become internalised.

Now all of this may sound difficult. But in a way it is easy enough. The teacher stays within the boundaries of the plan. Keep it simple. Know where the paragraph should start and where it should end. Try not to be tempted to take someone's 'good' idea that moves away from the plan. It is an act of direct teaching and the teacher is intending to focus upon certain aspects of writing to help the children make progress. Not everything has to be discussed. Keep it simple and direct.

One final thought. All of the above suggests that writing can only occur when working from reading. This is quite false. As children develop as writers, several model versions may be considered to see how different writers tackle an issue, therefore broadening the frame of reference. Also, moving from reading to writing is a useful tool for focused teaching. However, there need to be many occasions where children start from the writing itself, drawing on all their reading.

For instance, the teacher might display a rusty bicycle, ask the children to draw it and then move into a short description. This would not have to start with examples but could be very successful by working straight from the experience. In this instance when the children are writing, they are still drawing on their reading but also concentrating on the experience and fishing for words to capture the bike. In many ways, starting without the explicit reference to a reading model (or writing checklist) may liberate the children to focus more on the subject.

06 Good Writers Re-read

Writers nearly always read their work aloud. This is an important habit to develop with children. You read your work aloud primarily to 'listen' to it -- to hear how it sounds, whether it flows.

This acts as the other side of reading good books aloud to hear the tune. If a sentence is hard to read for the author then others will find that difficult too. Reading aloud also allows the writer to 'look' carefully to see if there any obvious mistakes -- such as words omitted or misspellings.

Working with a response partner before writing provides a useful testing point for ideas. Plans can be developed and then talked through. Then stories or information can be orally rehearsed. After writing, it is just as useful to 'test' one's writing out on a partner.

This has to be taught -- both the routine and the whole business of editing the composition as well as proof-reading for accuracy. Teachers can use sample pieces of their own into which they have built typical weaknesses or errors that the children make. The class then help the teacher revise the sample pieces of writing before looking at their own.

In the end though, the teacher has to tangle with the children's writing. Visualisers are ideal because instantly the class can all see someone's composition. The children, in role as authors, can talk about what they were trying to do, read their writing or a section aloud. What works can be discussed before suggestions taken for developments. Many writers say that their writing does not get written, it gets rewritten.

Activity:

Teach editing by demonstrating on your own pieces of writing. Work on pieces where there are similar weaknesses to the children.

Move on to the whole class acting as a response partner to individual children. Use a visualizer or whiteboard to show children's writing.

Make this a positive experience.

Begin with praise -- what do we like/what works well.

Let the author run the feedback session, reading the work aloud, commenting on what they like about it and inviting comments.

Children are expected to make positive suggestions that might help the author.

Select specific lines for everyone to consider that show strengths or places where the writing might be developed. Identify specific points for improvement which can be used to teach the craft of writing.

Improvement is not about 'up-levelling'. It is about make the writing more effective.

Leave final decisions with the author.

The technique of editing a sentence can be taught playfully - you can *change words, add on, add in, trim, re-order or use special effects* such as imagery or alliteration. This may be practised by using simple sentence games into which the teacher builds flaws such as over-writing (*the tired, weary, flagging teacher....).* A good response partner helps the writer to test out their words, looking for clarity, economy, coherence, flow and power.

Basic sentence	The dog ran down the road.
Change words	*The poodle scampered down the hill.*
Adding in (words, phrases, or clause)	*The bedraggled dog ran down the steep hill. / The dog, howling like a banshee, ran down the hill.*
Adding on (to the end or the front)	*The dog ran down the hill, barking desperately. / Sneezing and yelping, the dog ran down the hill.*
Re-order	*Down the hill ran the dog.*
Special effects	*The demented dog ran down the hill as fast as a cheetah.*

One simple tip is for writers to think how to hook their reader's interest. Many young writers need to learn to 'vary' their word choice and sentence pattern to create different effects. They become stuck with a limited range of syntactical structures (*He went down the road. He got on the bus. He sat down. He looked out of the window*).

Of course, why bother with all of this if the writing is not going to be published. Children's writing should be published in class scrapbooks, put on the Internet, made into booklets or audio CDs, published in class anthologies and performed aloud. Where children are very reluctant to edit their work, a set of glitzy gel pens can be used as 'polishing' pens to tempt them into editing.

One final point here is to mention the importance of the teacher working as 'editor' with the children. Ideally, this involves identifying the strengths in their writing and pinpointing places where writing might be improved. Effective marking is also most powerful when it leads directly into teaching because the growth has to happen in the child as a writer. So, effective teachers attend to their young writers -- using occasional individual writing conferences as well as guided sessions to talk through aspects of their writing. Such on-going assessment drives the teaching.

07 Good Writers Know about Grammar

It is worth noting that children who write well have found a way of making transcription automatic and easy so that their brains can concentrate on composition. Spelling liberates creativity. It is hard to be creative, if you have to pause on every third word and work out how it is spelled. Handwriting and spelling are also linked to self-image. In the same way, decoding fluently helps children focus on comprehension.

Children who struggle with spelling and have weak handwriting often do not see themselves as a writer. The teacher has to refocus their attention onto what they have to say. Daily spelling and sentence games in relation to the text type being taught and what will help children make progress are a simple way to develop confidence.

Children who write well also have control and understanding over language. It is handy to develop a technical vocabulary with which to discuss reading and writing. Knowing how language works also means that the writer can more consciously manipulate language to create different effects.

08 Good Writers Have Attitude

The National Literacy Trust carries out annual surveys tracking children's writing habits.

Only 28.7% children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoy writing in their free time and enjoyment drops significantly as children age. Only 11.9% write anything daily in their free time. However, about 38.7% report enjoying writing during the school day. Counter to what one might expect, children on free school meals are more likely to enjoy writing and write daily than their non-FSM peers. When children write in their free time, they are primarily motivated by:

- **Creativity & Imagination:** nearly 60% write to be creative and explore their ideas.
- **Wellbeing:** about 40% use writing to relax and express their thoughts or feelings.
- **Social Connections:** screen-based writing remains a highly popular form of regular communication.

If we are to regain pleasure and commitment to writing, then a key consideration may well be to focus school writing more on creativity, drawing on the imagination, exploring ideas that matter to children, as well as opportunities to explore their own thoughts and feelings. This would stand in stark contrast to the current formulaic approach to writing that has little to do with children's own lives.

I often get asked about what it is like to 'be a writer' and my answer is always the same. 'It is hard'. People who do not write may imagine otherwise but the truth is that it is hard work. Some days, it flows -- and you may remember writing stories at such a pace that your wrist ached. It seems to pour out. Other days, I cannot even get started.

Writing requires the orchestration of so many skills some of which may be quite taxing for a young child -- holding the pencil, thinking of spellings, keeping words on the line let alone thinking of something worth saying. But good writers know that it is worth persevering. They have felt what it is like to have success -- to create a beautiful idea, to capture and communicate a thought,

to tell a story to an enthralled audience, to present and explain ideas, to bring into being something that you may not have known before you started. They know that in the long run, the tussle with words is worthwhile.

My own experience leads me to believe that young writers -- all writers -- need plenty of praise and encouragement. After all, why bother to work at something so demanding, why make such an intellectual and imaginative effort if all you ever receive is criticism!

So young writers need to be prepared to commit themselves and fully enter the world they are creating or it runs the risk of becoming false and falling flat. Writing requires a special sort of fierce, imaginative and concentrated effort. But the rewards can be quite exhilarating when a poem is born or a story found. Young writers have to know what it feels like to create. And creativity matters because it makes us all special. We can all succeed but, of course, we will all succeed uniquely.

Good writers know how to abandon their fear. Most of us have sitting on our shoulders an inner critic -- maybe, for teachers, it is the ghost of past teachers or their parents. This unsettling voice whispers in the ear to remind us that we cannot spell, that we don't really know how to use a semi-colon, that our handwriting is lousy, that we never were that imaginative anyway! I have learned that when I am writing, I must not at any cost listen to that voice. If I do, then the writing shrivels on the page.

Children who write well have learned to put their fear to one side and focus on the flow of composition. The handwriting may be messy, the spelling may be inaccurate but they have sufficient skill to be able to focus on composing, listening to their inner voice.

Sometimes I wonder whether the traditional exercise book is all that helpful for many children. The message from the exercise book is that it has to be kept immaculate -- with a neat margin, the date written accurately, correct spelling and perfect writing straight off. Unfortunately, this is not how writing occurs and develops for many writers. David Almond, the author of Skellig, once showed me his journal which was a fascinating battlefield of ideas! Creativity can be messy.

It is the quality of the imagining and the crafting of the writing and not the messiness that matters.

Recent developments in some schools have suggested that using a 'writing journal' or magpie book can be very liberating for many children as a place for sketching ideas, listing words and thoughts, trialling sentences and playing about with language. Mini whiteboards also can perform a similar function -- with anything that the writer wishes to save, copied into a journal.

09 Good Readers Become Good Writers

How do we help children flourish as readers and writers?

...and to become a writer, you have to also be a reader. A special sort of reader -- a writer who reads as a writer. In part, it is the reader that we are that shapes the writer that we may become. I hope that anyone reading this essay will find the ideas useful when teaching children. It might also act as a catalyst to encourage more teachers to see themselves as writers.

To be a writer, children have to be constantly engaged in writing. They also have to read. We learn to write by practising writing, by trial and error, by tussling with the words. But it is not just writing on its own, for we also become a writer through becoming familiar with what works -- by reading good writing.

Initially, we read for what we hope will be the thrilling experience of entering another world. But a writer's reading becomes increasingly conscious of written style and powerful composition. It is a form of curiosity that most artists share. Painters are intrigued by other painters' techniques. Cooks watch closely to see how someone else musters up a soufflé. Writers attend to reading in the same sort of way.

How do we lure children into the regular habit of writing and reading? I have visited thousands of classes and it is sad to say but true -- in some schools, most of the children do not like writing. Children should enjoy writing, if they are to become writers. Around the world, national writing curricula are built around the notion of focussing upon proficiency in a range of writing types, over dominated by grammar usually with a nod to the writing process but nothing about writing knowledge such as how to make characters seem real to the reader.

I think that the question should not be 'how do we help children become good at a range of writing' but 'how do we develop the child as a writer'? Most people who design curriculum are more interested in ensuring that children are taught types of writing rather than developing young writers -- so for me the question that really matters is, 'how to develop a young writer who

enjoys and is committed to their writing'? If children see themselves as writers, understanding how their reading can be used as a catalyst for their writing, then they are more likely to be able to adapt their writing for a range of audiences and purposes. You end up in the same place but the route is different and the impact stronger.

I am imagining writing as a regular, daily activity that not only develops technical proficiency, the facility to manipulate ideas, but also builds a bank of possibilities to draw upon as well as sparking fresh ideas. Constant writing begins to exercise not only the ability to generate and select and combine words, craft and link sentences but also to imagine and create. This would involve more short-burst writing that involves manipulating sentences, brief poetic writing, creating paragraphs.

Writing has to be constantly practised. This does not mean the long haul -- marathon runners do not run a marathon every day -- they train in the gym and run short burst races. In the same way, the developing writer may only need a short task but it should be daily, it should be engaging and it should challenge, developing a pleasurable facility with language, confidence as a writer, constantly exercising the creative imagination. Jumpstart writing and tap into children's natural pleasure in playing with words, ideas, their experience and inner world. Joy and success are key elements in growing writers.

© Pie Corbett 2026