

GCSE (9-1)

English

Language

**Students as writers.
Approaches to
improving writing
skills.**





Students as writers

Not students doing yet more writing...

‘My responsibility as a writer is to be as good as I can at my craft. Understanding what language can do, gaining control of the language, enables one to make people weep, make them laugh, even make them go to war. You can do this by learning how to harness the power of the word.’

Maya Angelou



Objectives for the session

- Consider ideas and research which helps us understand the process of writing and the implications for teaching.
- Explore practical classroom approaches to enable students of all abilities to extend their repertoire.



A brief history of teaching writing in schools

- 1950s: emphasis on teaching grammatical accuracy and clause analysis in belief this would transfer into better writing by students. It didn't.
- 1960s: reaction to failure of grammar teaching to improve writing. Emphasis on creativity.
- 1970/80s: refinement of mere creativity through an exploration of the **processes** of writing. In UK – National Writing Project was influential.
- 1997/2010: National Literacy Strategy: linguistic focus and genre theory.



Two conflicting paradigms

1. Writing for construction and correctness. Analysis/assessment of pupil writing is restricted to generalised comments about structure, organisation, spelling and punctuation.
2. Writing as process. Views the meanings conveyed by the texts as paramount. Success is about how effectively the writing evokes thoughts and feelings in the mind of the reader.

Two contrasting paradigms for teaching and assessing writing, Pat D'Arcy (NATE monograph, 2000)



Curriculum content: Paradigm 1

- Draw on their experience of good fiction, different poetic forms and of reading, watching and performing plays.
- Use imaginative vocabulary and varied linguistic and literary techniques.
- Exploit choice of language and structure to achieve particular effects and appeals to the reader.
- Use a range of techniques and different ways of organising and structuring material to convey ideas, themes and characters.

Two contrasting paradigms for teaching and assessing writing, Pat D'Arcy (NATE monograph, 2000)



Curriculum content:

Paradigm 2

- Draw on their own experience of life in their community, as it is and as they would like it to be.
- Imagine what it might be like to be in someone else's shoes.
- Create new landscapes, combining familiar with unfamiliar settings.
- Experiment with combining more than one voice in their narrative.
- Involve the reader by offering possible clues to what is going on.

Two contrasting paradigms for teaching and assessing writing, Pat D'Arcy (NATE monograph, 2000)



So what IS 'writing'?

‘It is generally accepted that writing is the most difficult, most complex, of the four language skills, requiring solitary, creative, thoughtful, accurate and focussed compositional energy, plus a high degree of reflective thinking and (usually) personal engagement.’

Getting Going: generating, shaping and developing ideas in writing,
DCSF publication (2008)



‘Teachers as Writers’ project

The project, which allowed teachers to undertake the tasks they set their students, indicated:

- how difficult it is to write, at all levels and ages
- how little they used ‘planning’ devices they encourage their students to use
- how writing develops organically; ideas spring up during writing
- good writers often re-draft as they go, rather than writing and then re-drafting
- it’s all a lot more difficult than a list of atomised skills suggests. The skills are in interplay with each other and ‘thought’ is at the heart of it.

Devon LEA/Arvon Foundation (2000–2002)



So what IS 'writing'?

‘Any writing, about whatever personal or impersonal subject, for whatever audience or purpose, can never comprise anything but some focused and edited version of inner speech.’

Integrity in the teaching of writing: James Moffett (1980)



So what IS 'writing'?

‘The composing process... is laminated and recursive. (It) does not occur as a left-to-right, solid, uninterrupted activity with even pace. Rather, there are recursive, as well as anticipatory features; and there are interstices (and) pauses involving hesitation phenomena of various length and sorts...’

The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders, J. Emig (1971)



So what IS ‘writing’?

‘A reservoir of subliminal recollections which are shaped at the point of utterance.

“Shaping at the point of utterance” is possible because much of the grammatical organisation, for mother tongue speakers at any rate, has already been accomplished for them by the subliminal organising power of the brain.

You don’t have to reinvent English grammar when you compose a sentence... any more than you have to take grammar lessons to learn to talk.’

Forming, thinking, writing- the composing imagination, Ann Berthoff (1982)



Grammar for Writing

‘The emphasis throughout the Grammar for Writing (GfW) pedagogy is on exploring the **effects that grammatical features create on the reader...**

In all instances the learning is focused on the effects created on the reader. In GfW, it is crucially important that teaching makes connections for learners between a particular grammar feature and its potential meaning-making effect’.

How to accelerate progress in writing at KS3, Prof. Debra Myhill
(Pearson monograph, 2014)



GfW research results

- Statistical analysis showed that students (using GfW approaches) improved their writing scores by 20% compared with 11% in the non-intervention group.
- More able students benefited from the embedding of grammar teaching. Follow-up project for weaker writers saw equally impressive results.
- Statistical analysis showed a clear correlation between a teacher's grammatical knowledge and the success of the intervention.



A classroom example of GfW

Using authentic text to link writers to the community of writers

Context: Writing a dystopian narrative.

Learning focus: How tense and pronouns can be used to establish narrative perspective.

Task:

- students read an extract from *The Hunger Games*
- pairs discuss the tense used: how does this give the narrative more immediacy? How do the pronouns (he, we, us) position the reader and establish the narrator's point of view?
- students play with a portion of the extract, changing tense and pronoun choice and feeding back on effects.



Some caveats around GfW

- A bald message that ‘teaching grammar improves writing’ could lead to teaching of a very narrow set of aspects of grammar rather than the rich interpretation of ‘grammar’ in the original research.
- Do we need to use complex grammatical terminology to comment on language? Myhill’s own research acknowledges that less able students were unable to use the terminology effectively.
- Level of grammatical knowledge could be a barrier for many teachers – and students. If it’s not easy for teachers, it’ll be difficult for students.



The question of grammar

- Does *implicit* grammatical knowledge continue to develop and inform the growing understanding of readers and writers? Does it always need to be made *explicit* if it is to be effectively deployed?
- Is the *explicit* teaching of grammar ‘in the context of pupils’ own writing’ really more meaningful than teaching grammar ‘in a decontextualised exercise form’? Does it help pupils to capture meaning for themselves?

Some implications for the classroom





Teacher expertise

- In *Teachers Make A Difference – What is the Research Evidence*, John Hattie found that what makes most difference to students is the ‘expertise’ of their teacher. In teaching writing, the expertise is the ability to respond to students and their needs and make judgments and changes in relation to what they observe.
- Formative assessment – esp. dialogue with students at the point of writing – is where teacher expertise has most traction. Making space for workshop approaches to writing can make this possible.



Making space for writing

‘There need to be more opportunities for extended writing, more lessons for writing and a workshop approach to writing. All too often writing is crowded out by starters, teacher talk, plenaries and other fixed elements; writing is squeezed into tiny spaces and is often left unfinished. Opportunities for experimentation and risk-taking, as well as editing and re-drafting have shrunk. Particularly with creative writing, but indeed with all writing, this creates a culture in which there is too little writing and it is not done ‘for pleasure’.

Ways of improving the teaching and assessment of writing, Barbara Bleiman (EMC, unpublished paper 2012)



Supporting writing

‘The general point about support, structures and scaffolding is that students should be given ***the least support possible in order to succeed***, rather than the most. This allows them to work out strategies, structures and ways of grappling with difficulties for themselves and allows knowledge and confidence gained to be firmly embedded as deeper learning. Lewis and Wray’s writing frames started with excellent intentions and underlying pedagogy but have been disastrously abused within the education system. They have led to poor, formulaic writing, failure to really teach students how to think for themselves and build up deeper confidence and understanding of how writing works and have limited rather than developed students’ achievement in exams’.

Barbara Bleiman (EMC paper, Jan 2012)



The owners of these two fridges go on a blind date. Tell the story.



**Imagine a world
where sharks swim
in the forest and
somehow you find
yourself lost in the
woods.**

[As best as I can tell, this picture is from flickr user GRAPHICS
DESIGNED: http://www.flickr.com/photos/graphics_designed/6123943984



“The person you think of as yourself exists only for you and even you don’t know who that is. Everyone else creates a version of ‘you’ in their head. You’re not the same person to anyone. There are thousands of versions of you out there.”

— summarized/translated from
One, No One and One Hundred Thousand by Luigi Pirandello

Describe one of the “thousands of versions of you out there.” Pick one person you know and describe yourself from their perspective. What’s the version of you that lives in their head? Why do they have that version of you in their head? How is that version different from the version of you that others might have?

Common Core:
Writing Anchor
Standard 2: Write
informative/explanatory
texts to examine a topic and
convey ideas and
information clearly.



Responses to writing

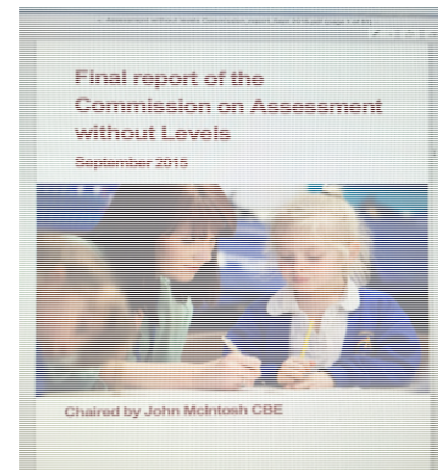
‘For complex learning outcomes like writing, there are few pre-determined stages or next steps, only exploration of different possibilities for development’.

Prof. John Keen, University of Manchester, 2012



Formative assessment

- In-school formative assessment should be an integral part of teaching and learning. It allows teachers to understand pupil performance on a continuing basis. It enables teachers to identify when pupils are struggling, when they have consolidated learning and when they are ready to progress. In this way, it supports teachers to provide appropriate support or extension as necessary. It also enables teachers to evaluate their own teaching of particular topics or concepts and to plan future lessons accordingly.
- The majority of the most powerful assessment information – i.e. that which makes a difference to progress – will not be written down.





Marking as an interpretive response

- Pat D'Arcy used the phrase 'interpretive marking' in her NATE monograph. This is a response to a student on what their writing conveyed to you as reader.
- Read her response to the Y8 piece about a frightening encounter.



GCSE exam writing

- There is a tendency for students to write too much in the exam room.
- Look at the answer to the question *Write about a time you, or someone you know, had an exciting experience.*
- Discuss with the person sitting next to you what you would feed back to this student if this was their mock exam answer.



Planning for effective teaching of writing

Writing schemes should:

- redress the balance to ensure that teaching reflects a *process-led* paradigm as well as a linguistically focused one
- provide formally identified spaces in the curriculum to practise the skills of writing
- reflect the complexity of the composing process, with opportunities for reflection, review and text revision
- balance the degree of freedom with the need to provide scaffolding, based on formative assessment of individual students.

The end...

