How to accelerate progress in writing at KS3

The 'Grammar for Writing' pedagogy
Developed by Professor Debra Myhill, University of Exeter

A summary

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Professor Debra Myhill directs an educational research team at the University of Exeter. As well as being Associate Dean of Research, Debra also leads on the Secondary English PGCE course at the University of Exeter and is a former English teacher.

Debra and her team carry out research into a wide range of areas within literacy, including focusing specifically on the role of grammar teaching in improving writing. They recently published the findings of a three-year study into the effectiveness of **contextualised grammar teaching** – a pedagogy developed at the University of Exeter and now called **Grammar for Writing**.

Background: Why focus on improving writing?

Writing is a key literacy skill essential to succeeding in English and other curriculum subjects. However, research strongly suggests that poor writing skills are one of the fundamental reasons why more students do not go on to realise their potential. Time and again, teachers, assessment experts and business leaders have reported that young people struggle to write in a sustained, coherent and effective way. Tackling this problem is one of the key challenges to be overcome if more young people are to succeed, whether that be in the exam hall, the workplace or life in general.

Summary of Professor Debra Myhill's research and findings

The trial

- The Grammar for Writing trial involved **Year 8 classes from 32 schools**, drawn from across the Midlands and the South-West and selected in a random manner.

- Half the classes were then randomly allocated to **a comparison group** and the other half to **an intervention group**. This is what's known as a Randomised Control Trial (RCT) – the gold standard in scientific research such as clinical trialling.

- The intervention involved the **teaching of three schemes of work** focusing on writing. The learning objectives in these schemes were drawn from the Framework for English to ensure the learning outcomes were wholly compatible with national expectations.

- The three schemes of work embedded the teaching of **contextualised grammar** with a focus on understanding the effect of grammatical choices – for example, looking at how noun phrases can support effective description of settings in narrative.

- The comparison group addressed the same learning objectives, the same medium-term plan and produced the same written outcomes, but did not receive the detailed lesson plans that embedded the teaching of grammar.

- Throughout the trial, neither the participating schools nor the teachers were aware of the focus on contextualised grammar, **so as not to bias the results**.

- A pre and post test of writing, mirroring the national writing test for 13-14 year olds, was used to determine any improvements in writing. This test was designed and marked by Cambridge Assessment, to ensure the reliability of the findings.

The results – a summary

- The statistical analysis showed that students in the intervention group improved their writing scores by **20%**, compared with 11% in the non-intervention group. In other words, students following the Grammar for Writing pedagogy made almost **double the rate of progress** in writing over the period of the intervention. This is broadly equivalent to **an extra level of progress** over the period.

- More able students in particular benefited from the embedding of grammar teaching. A follow-up research study, in which the pedagogy was adapted for weaker writers, saw equally impressive results.

- The statistical analysis also showed a clear correlation between a teacher's grammatical knowledge and the success of the intervention.

For full details of the research study and the findings, turn to the back page.

The Grammar for Writing pedagogy: Principles and examples

The Grammar for Writing pedagogy has been developed and refined through a lengthy and rigorous process of trialling and the use of quantitative and qualitative feedback from that trialling. Over that time, seven key principles have emerged:

1. Exploring the use of grammar for *effect*

The emphasis throughout the Grammar for Writing pedagogy is on exploring the **effects that grammatical features create on the reader**. This might be exploring the use of modal verbs by speech writers to express different levels of assertiveness, or the way a fiction writer uses extended noun phrases to add descriptive detail. In all instances the learning is focused on the effects created on the reader. In Grammar for Writing, it is crucially important that teaching makes connections for learners between a particular grammar feature and its potential meaning-making effect.

Context: Writing a dystopian narrative.

Learning Focus: How sentence structures can be used to create a sense of a 'world gone wrong'.

Task

- Students read the opening sentence of George Orwell's *1984* and discuss what impression it gives of the world described in *1984*.
  It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.
- Provide students with resource identifying key sentence types and their features.
- Discussion of Orwell's opening sentence. What type is it? (compound sentence).
- Discussion: What is the relationship between the clauses in a compound sentence? (often they are of equal weighting and significance – e.g. 'I went to the shop and I bought some food.')
- Discussion: What might this suggest about the world of *1984*? What effect does Orwell achieve by weighting 'the clocks were striking thirteen' equally with 'It was a bright cold day'?
- Writing task: Students experiment with the opening to *1984*, changing from compound to complex to simple. How does this alter the impact? Students go on to write their own opening sentence, playing with sentence structure to juxtapose the normal and the strange.

A classroom example of making connections between a grammatical structure and a writing context.

2. Grammatical metalanguage is used, but it is always explained through examples

Grammar for Writing is not a grammar course. The purpose is not to produce students who can identify and label parts of a sentence; rather the purpose is **to make visible how texts are shaped** and how effects are created, so that students can apply this understanding to their own writing. While grammatical metalanguage is built into lessons, this is always supported by examples and modelling so students can play with a particular structure and discuss its effects, even if they do not remember the grammatical name.

Context: Writing a persuasive speech.

Learning Focus: How modal verbs can express different levels of assertiveness or possibility in persuasion.

Task

- Provide students with resource listing modal verbs: can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, ought to.
- Experiment with using different modal verbs within the same sentence – e.g. 'You _____ complete your English homework'. What effects are created?
- Explore use of modal verbs in famous speeches.
- Writing task: Students imagine they are Roy Hodgson talking to the England team before a penalty shoot out. Write a short 'pep talk' arguing that it's possible to win, using modal verbs to predict what might / can / will happen.

A classroom example of using grammatical metalanguage through examples.

3. Discussion is fundamental in encouraging critical conversations about language

At the heart of Grammar for Writing is the principle that talk is a key mechanism through which students learn. The approach deliberately incorporates regular opportunities for students to discuss the grammar points being introduced, to explore the possibilities of language and discuss interpretations and effects. This exploratory talk supports students in understanding concepts but also in moving students on from superficial learning about grammar (e.g. add adjectives to create description) to deeper learning (e.g. some adjectives are redundant because the noun itself is descriptive).

Context: Writing a fictional narrative.

Learning Focus: How short sentences can create tension in narrative.

Task

- In pairs, students read an extract from Peter Benchley's *Jaws*.
- Students locate the three shortest sentences used in the extract.
- Paired discussion: Why might Benchley have chosen to make these three sentences so short? What part do they play in the narrative structure of this incident? What effect might they have on the reader?

A classroom example of a discussion task to stimulate critical conversations about text.

4. Authentic examples from authentic texts

There are two very good reasons why the Grammar for Writing approach uses authentic texts as models and exemplars:

1. Firstly, using authentic texts avoids the pitfalls of examples artificially created to exemplify a grammatical point. Traditional school grammar books are often laden with sentences created to neatly exemplify a grammatical point and are often devoid of context or are even implausible.

2. The second reason for using authentic texts is to help young writers explore what real writers do, what choices they make in order to create desired effects. Using authentic texts in this way makes meaningful links between being a reader and being a writer.

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*.
- Paired discussion of the tense used: How does this give the narrative more immediacy?
- Paired discussion: How do the pronouns used (he, we, us) position the reader and establish the narrator's viewpoint.
- Students play with a portion of the extract, changing tense and pronoun choice and feeding back on the effects created.

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A classroom example of using an authentic text to link writers to the community of writers.

5. The use of 'creative imitation'

Imitation can be a powerful tool with which to improve students' writing. The Grammar for Writing approach advocates the use of textual models and the use of imitation as a scaffold that allows students to try out new structures and play with new ways of expressing something.

Context: Argument Writing.

Learning Focus: How using an imperative opening sentence followed by an emotive narrative can act as an effective hook for a persuasive argument which follows.

Task

Use the following opening of a fund-raising campaign leaflet against animal cruelty as a model for writing the opening paragraph of your own argument.

Picture the scene. There are dogs running wild around a courtyard littered with muck and machinery. There are dogs rammed in cages, noses pressed against the bars. There are dogs whose fur is hanging in great clumps, with bare skin and running sores. The noise of barking and yelping is deafening, but in one cage a golden labrador lies silent, head on its paws, looking at the yard with melancholy eyes.

A classroom example of using imitation to support the use of model patterns in writing.

6. Writing as design: Supporting students to make choices in their writing

Grammar for Writing seeks to show students how design choices operate at every level of text production, from choices about the content and structure of a text to the choices about words, images and syntactical structures. The effects of syntactic shaping are too often ignored and can be a rich method of creating effects – for example, the subtle shifts of meaning and emphasis which can be created by inverting the syntax of a sentence so that the subject comes at the end; by choosing to place adjectives after the noun rather than before the noun; by using a verbless sentence and so on. Encouraging thinking about choices and design makes the writing process more visible.

Context: Argument Writing.

Learning Focus: How sentence length and sentence structure can be used to create rhetorical effect in the closing of a persuasive argument.

Task

Students are given the sentences from the final paragraph of a persuasive speech, each sentence on a separate strip of paper. They are given two sets of the same sentences. In pairs, they create two versions of the ending of the argument and discuss the different ways the two versions work. Finally they choose and justify the choice of their preferred version.

A classroom example of an activity supporting the making of design choices.

7. Language play, experimentation and risk-taking

Where 'traditional' grammar teaching has often been characterised by prescriptive, rule-bound views and an emphasis on accuracy and error correction, Grammar for Writing promotes playfulness and experimentation with language. This helps young writers to see the elasticity of language and the possibilities it affords, rather than what writers must not do. While Grammar for Writing does offer explicit guidance around metalinguistic knowledge, this is always overlaid with playful activities allowing exploration and experimentation with new knowledge. Indeed, Philip Pullman describes this kind of playfulness as fooling about:

"... fooling about with the stuff the world is made of: with sounds, and with shapes and colours, and with clay and paper and wood and metal, and with language. Fooling about, playing with it, pushing it this way and that, turning it sideways, painting it different colours, looking at it from the back, putting one thing on top of another, asking silly questions, mixing things up, making absurd comparisons, discovering unexpected similarities, making pretty patterns, and all the time saying "Supposing... I wonder... What if..."

Pullman 2005.

Context: Writing poetry.

Learning Focus: How varying sentence structure and sentence length can create different emphases in poetry.

Task

Using an exploded version of Sylvia Plath's *Mirror* presented alphabetically as a word grid, students are asked to generate pairs of sentences, experimenting with the possibilities outlined below:

- Beginning with a non-finite verb, adverb or prepositional phrase.
- Using a short verbless sentence.
- Using a one-word sentence.
- Using repetition of a single word or short phrase.

A classroom example of a discussion task to stimulate critical conversations about text.

Skills for Writing

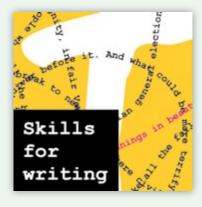## The proven-to-work approach to accelerating progress in writing

Coming in 2013, **Skills for Writing** is a unique **digital, print and training solution**, developed in partnership with **Professor Debra Myhill** and her team.

Skills for Writing embeds the principles of the **Grammar for Writing pedagogy** – trialled and **proven to significantly accelerate the rate of writing progress**.

- **Accelerate progress in writing** with this new solution based on a proven-to-work pedagogy, improving writing performance for a clear route to KS4 success**.**

- **Teach grammar in a contextualised way, always focusing on effects achieved**, so students have a wider range of techniques with which to craft creative, effective texts. This is not just another grammar course.

- **ActiveTeach** supports teachers in embedding the core principles of Grammar for Writing in their front-of-class teaching, providing the student book on screen and a wealth of digital resources focused on building grammatical knowledge and improving writing.

- **Online, self-marking homework activities on ActiveLearn** consolidate and reinforce the in-class teaching, encouraging students to write independently, reflect on their writing and understand how to improve.

- **Accompanied by CPD training** to support teachers in using the Grammar for Writing pedagogy to improve students' writing.

- **Learn more.**
- **See Debra talk about Grammar for Writing in a short video.**
- **Try samples.**
- **Register interest now.**

Find out more about Skills for Writing

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