



Innovating on non-fiction

Once the children have become familiar with the original non-fiction model text, they are ready to move into the second phase, which involves using the original as a basis for creating something new – writing their own version. Do not move on to innovation till the original model is deeply embedded as you cannot innovate on something that is only vaguely known.

The idea is that the children draw upon the underlying structure and language features of the original model, to enable them to create their own version about a different topic. To put it simply, the children might have already spent a week learning all about badgers, including learning orally a basic text. This is then used as a basis for writing a new text about foxes.

Ideally, by this point, the original model will be displayed, with the text boxed up and annotated – accompanied by lists of the key ingredients as well as writing reminders, techniques and tricks which have all been drawn out of discussions with the children. These should be on the ‘working wall’ so that the teacher can refer to them, as well as being inside the children’s writing journals for their own personal reference. One key point is that the boxing up and toolkits must be co-constructed with the children. Whilst it may be tempting to do this at home, this must be resisted at all costs because if you do all the work for them, the children will learn nothing!

The teacher will need to plan a new starting point, an avenue for investigation or experience to act as a basis for the children’s writing. All of us write best about what we know about – and what matters to us. This is especially true of non-fiction. Children can only write powerfully when they really have deep understanding and something to say – if their knowledge is thin, then the writing can only be flimsy. The children’s immersion in a topic helps to build up their knowledge, understanding and views in a way that makes them ‘experts’ on the topic. It should mean that children come to their writing with the enthusiasm of the expert and so they are more likely to be committed to trying hard.

The boxed-up grid from the original model can be used as a basic planner. New information needs to be gathered and organised onto the planning grid. New boxes may be added to the grid to flesh out the information, always thinking about what the reader needs to know. Different approaches to gathering information will have to be modelled and practised, eg:

- Note-taking; listing questions before finding answers; interviewing visitors and experts; writing or emailing for information; skimming and scanning information books and texts; watching tv/film and taking notes; using the internet; using trips and outings to gather information; using the school grounds, locality and community to discover information, views and ideas ...
- All of this has to be underpinned by learning how to judge whether a source is reliable as well as double-checking with other sources.

Depending on the children's needs, it can be useful to draw a new text map or washing line and to 'talk the new text' in pairs, refining ideas and trying out different ways of expressing ideas, views and information. Reference should be made back to the original to check for useful language features that might be recycled. Pairs can come to the front and present their text orally, receiving feedback from the teacher and class. This acts as a model so that pairs feedback to other pairs, working as response partners, identifying where an oral text works well as well as making suggestions for improvement.

During innovation it is important to keep playing spelling and sentence games so that the children have plenty of oral and written practice in the language features that they will need when they come to write. It can also be handy to play drama games to develop a text further with activities such as interviewing experts or role playing TV programmes which tune the children in to the language they will need to use. One simple game is to work in pairs and use the phrase, '*tell me more about*' which encourages the children to develop and extend ideas prior to writing.

The teacher may then use the planning grid to move from an oral version into writing. During shared writing with the class, the text will be further refined, often referring back to the original model or models. It is important for the teacher to involve the children in the composition, taking suggestions and pushing the children to refine their ideas so that they are fluent, coherent and effective. At all times, the teacher needs to bear in mind the level that the text should be written at – which should be above the standard of the children.

Of course, life is never this simple and there are no classes where children are all writing at the same level. This is why teachers use guided writing to group children according to their need and to teach them at their level. Many teachers find it useful to develop a text over several days, focusing on different aspects. Key points need to be referred to and included so that the shared writing is an opportunity to teach progress. During shared writing, the teacher or the children may explain why one idea is more effective than another. The teacher pushes the children to generate possibilities and to judge what would work best. Everyone should be drawing on the original model, as well as the list of ingredients whilst being driven by using their writing techniques to make the composition powerful.

The term 'talk for writing' really describes all the talk that surrounds the teaching of writing. It includes the way in which an effective teacher thinks aloud, articulating the writerly processes that they are demonstrating, as well as engaging the children as writers in talking through ideas and refining expression.

Constant rereading helps to ensure that the writing flows coherently as well as being a chance to spot mistakes or clumsy writing that jars on the ear. Part of the success of writing is the ability to capture the 'tune' of the text type so that the sentences flow rhythmically in the right register. Pausing to reread helps children 'hear' where editing is needed.

As we have noted, 'boxing up' is a useful strategy because it encourages children to write in paragraphs. The language ingredients will help to link ideas and the sentences to be written in an appropriate style. However, all of this has to become servant to the overall purpose of the writing, bearing in mind the intended 'reader'. We use our writing style to create an effect.

"Boxing-up works across all text types and genres. Making this a key component for all text analysis and planning for writing helped children feel control of learning as each text type could be dealt with in the same way." – Lewisham non-fiction project

Occasionally, the teacher will wish to 'demonstrate' during the composition. By this, I mean that the teacher explains aloud some new or difficult feature that has been introduced to the children. Often aspects of progress are introduced in this way so that the teacher shows children how to do something, before having a go together until ultimately children attempt something similar themselves.

The final text is read through and edited. It helps to make the odd mistake or build in a typical weakness so that a discussion may be opened up that relates to something that the children then look for in their own writing. It is worth bearing in mind that shared and guided writing are teaching episodes so need to be well planned. It is useful to write out your own version, ensuring that it is pitched at the right level, including the features that you wish to draw to the children's attention. Of course, the children will generate different ideas but the pre-written text gives the teacher both confidence and reminder to focus on any specific teaching points.

Shared writing is not a question of quickly just doing the introduction. The teacher has to show, through involving the class in the process, how to write whole text. Shared writing is then followed immediately by the children attempting their own composition – perhaps working on the writing over several days, section by section. Ultimately, the final copy may be put into a booklet, onto the school's website, displayed or turned into some form of presentation. This encourages an attention to detail and focuses the mind on the need to present writing as accurately and powerfully as possible, taking good account of the need to inform, persuade, explain or instruct an audience.

Non-fiction innovations may include:

- **Additions** – rewrite the original model but add more information.
- **New subjects** – use the underlying pattern and ingredients for a new topic.

To get the innovations going you will need:

- **An exciting theme or experience** – make sure that there is an interesting topic or experience that the children will be writing about. This might be fiction based or something that the class is exploring. Whatever the subject, the children must have in-depth knowledge and experience otherwise the writing will suffer. Use 'real experts' where possible so that the children hear

adults using the language and discussing the information, eg, David Attenborough.

- **Develop the text orally** – gather information onto a text map or washing line and then lead the children in orally rehearsing the text, repeating key actions for the language features. This can be done as a class, in groups or pairs.
- **Continue to play games that help children internalise the language patterns and understand the topic**, eg, spelling, sentence games and drama activities.
- **Use Shared and Guided Writing to involve the children in writing** – show the whole process from gathering information, boxing it up into paragraphs, drafting and crafting sentences, rereading and polishing. Plan this carefully to ensure that the text is at the right level and includes the necessary features. Remember to pause for paired talk, involving the children in shaping sentences; keep referring back to the model and work from the plan; if children are less confident, then ‘hug’ closely to the original text that can be displayed on the screen. Use colour coding to highlight key features. Older children should use writing journals to jot down and ‘magpie’ ideas and words. Younger children benefit from the teaching assistant making a class bank of words and ideas that were suggested but not used. Keep rereading the writing as it grows so that no one sentence is written in isolation. This helps to gain flow but also means that the children develop the habit of ‘listening’ for the tune of the text. Use colour to emphasise anything that you wish them to ‘have a go at’.
- **Use the display and writing journals** – as a consistent visual aid to support the writing. Work in partnership with your TA to develop this display capturing each feature as it is taught. The display can also feature the text map or washing line, boxed up texts, word lists, sentence patterns, reminders – anything that might help.
- **Independent writing** – the children write their own versions, using all the support available, eg – the original exemplar, the class plan, rapid brainstorms to generate ideas or words, ‘draw and tell’ before writing. Learning partners can be helpful so children reread to each other after each paragraph or section. One useful tip is for children to use a dotted line under any words that they may find hard to spell rather than ‘dodging’ a word they wish to use.

“Yes I like writing more because I like the flow of writing it feels good in a way. I’m concentrating and listening more and that has helped my writing.”
– Hope, pupil from Lewisham non-fiction project

“Pupil perception interviews were also carried out mid project. By the midterm interview all who initially claimed not to like writing or gave non committal answers – ‘sometimes’, ‘kind of’ – had become definite a yes.

When talking about when they do their best writing most answers were more explicit and often referred to the strategies being trialled e.g. ‘when I’ve planned it well’, ‘when I know what I want to write’, ‘when we’ve done a shared write’.” – Lewisham non-fiction project

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The steps within the innovation stage

Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New stimulus – to build content, eg, develop a story idea; focus on an experience to use as basis for poetry or develop knowledge/views for non-fiction; build in a sense of audience and purpose. 	Select topic that will interest children and that ‘matters’.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model drawing a new map / box up and retell innovation. 	Feedback to sharpen & develop retelling.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared writing – staged section by section. 	Focus shared writing on aspects that children need in order to make progress – as well as writing strategies, eg, using the plan.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guided writing – in focused groups (refer to targets). 	Draw together flexible groups, based on what they need as writers/in their writing.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children write their own versions – weaker writers ‘hug closely’, relying on the original; use of sentence checkers; whilst stronger writers use the toolkit. 	Children write, drawing on models, shared writing, toolkits and any specific targets.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daily feedback/ ‘marking’ – teacher and pupil dialogue, using highlighters, etc. • Whole class discussion on what works. • Children share work with response partner. • Immediate improvement of writing in light of discussion. 	Use examples (e.g. use visualiser) to discuss ‘what works’ and demonstrate ‘how to improve’. ‘Feedback’ should lead to direct action and improvement – focus on targets.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final reading of texts in ‘writing circles’ plus evaluation discussion. • Teacher and children decide next steps. • Discuss, demonstrate and set tickable targets. 	Everyone reads their completed piece in a circle - discusses/writes about what has been achieved. Involve children in deciding on ‘mini lessons’ to help achieve targets and write well.

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