



Independent writing

The aim of Talk for Writing is to grow independent writers. Here are some suggestions for how this can be achieved first in relation to narrative and then non-fiction. I then look at how such independence can be prepared for through the innovation stage of the imitation, innovation, independent application process.

Independent narrative writing

As the children build up experience of writing stories, there should also be opportunities to write freely, drawing on everything that they have been taught. At the end of units, many schools have developed short 'really independent' units where the teacher provides a motivating starting point and the children write whatever they wish. Children never become independent readers until they choose what to read, developing their own taste for different authors and styles; in the same way, children are not writers until they make their own choices about what to write.

Here are a few examples of KS2 units that provide time for children to write entirely independently drawing on the taught units. Start from a great stimulus and then list the possibilities with the class. They can then choose what to write. Provide a number of days for them to plan, draft, edit and publish their own writing:

Example 1: 'Stranded' – the children have been shipwrecked on a desert island. The children could:

- draw maps of the island; write diary entries and stories about the storm, logging the first few days of survival and even the rescue;
- find images of desert islands and write an advert for an island holiday;
- Invent their own island – draw the map and write a leaflet about its flora and fauna;
- Write a monologue revealing the stranded sailor's wishes and dreams, hopes and fears;
- Write the sea captain's log depicting the rescue;
- Imagine that the ship's cat is also rescued; write a recount in the role of the cat!
- Write an alphabet of things found on the island, etc.

Example 2: 'The Lighthouse' – use the short film 'The Lighthouse' from the Literacy Shed. The children could:

- write the story of what happened from the viewpoint of the lighthouse keeper/ the ship's captain/ a cabin boy or one of the villagers;

- the event could be written up as a newspaper article or the keeper's log;
- write a poem about 'the storm';
- write explanations of other ideas for saving the ship;
- write a list with 'ten ways to stop a lighthouse keeper from being bored';
- find out about lighthouses and write a fact file;
- design the perfect lighthouse.;
- write the story that explains why the keeper is alone in the lighthouse, etc.

Example 3: 'Voices in the Park' – respond to this great picture book (or any other decent picture book or novel). The children could:

- write diary entries in role as different characters;
- write a short play based on the characters chatting at a bus stop;
- write letters between the two children;
- write about what happened from a park keeper's viewpoint;
- write a letter from the father persuading the mother to let the children play together – and then write the reply;
- create the newspaper that the man is reading;
- write a letter that the mother has in her handbag;
- write about what you think will happen to the four main characters;
- write about the adults from the dog's view!
- write a 'transformation list poem' in which park objects turn into other things, e.g. *In the park, the roundabout becomes / a Catherine wheel sending out golden sparks. In the park, a tree becomes / a flame shimmering in the autumn air.*

Example 3: The Adventures of Harris Burdick – this wonderful book consists of a sequence of unrelated and rather disturbing images. Children choose one to use as a basis for writing. For example:

- If the chosen image is the front cover, what would the story title be? Write the story;
- Put 2 images together and link them;
- Write the story about Harris Burdick, explaining why he never returned!
- Take an image and write just the paragraph that goes with it. Then write the paragraph before and what happened next so that you have a mini story of 3 paragraphs.

Independent non-fiction writing

Once a unit of work has been taught on any type of non-fiction, what has been learned should be applied independently across the curriculum. For example:

- Explain how a dragon's fire breathing equipment works; then use the transferable language patterns to explain the role of the skeleton and muscles for support, protection and movement;
- Once, the children have persuaded Bilbo to go on a journey with the dwarves, write a persuasive article about the role of diet, exercise and lifestyle in relation to healthy living.

In these examples, the main focus will be the children using what they have learned in science but revisiting their English work and writing independently.

Short-burst writing

Some schools hold regular short-burst writing sessions. These may involve shared writing but on some occasions, the children will select their own image or use a starting point such as an object and write independently, taking the writing in their own direction. Photographs and works of art may act as intriguing stimuli. Try using unusual objects such as a brass lamp, a lit candle, a ship in a bottle, a rusty bicycle or a mirror. The trick is, perhaps, to make sure that you have used shared writing on many occasions so that the children know how to 'look' carefully at the detail and use that to write a brief paragraph and bring the object alive through sharp description. It is also worth helping them think through the 'possibilities'. For instance, who is looking into the mirror and what are they thinking? Write a paragraph from the point of view of the sailor trapped, frozen to the spot inside the bottle. Where is the candle burning and who is there – what are they doing, thinking or waiting for? Who is holding the brass lamp; where are they going? Put a character onto the bike as they are being chased!

Challenging innovation as the route to independence

Sometimes, you reach the end of a unit and the children have moved away considerably from the original model. It is worth remembering that young children, those who have just arrived in the country and those who struggle will need to 'hug closely' to the original model. This helps them to internalise the sentence and text structures so that they begin to acquire these as part of their linguistic repertoire. However, many confident young writers should not be hugging closely.

At Watermoor Primary, the children decide whether they need to hug closely or 'shake hands' with a model text. 'Shaking hands' means deciding to use just the core transferable features and underlying plot idea. In this way, some children will be writing more independently within a unit.

If we look at the extended model story 'Thog', it begins in this way:

It had been a long climb up the mountain and, at last, Thog had reached the summit. Thog sat by the cairn at the top of the ridge and stared down the slope towards the distant forest. Somewhere in there was his destination, the stone tower. Word had reached the dwarves that the beekeeper, Olafson, was sick and needed the root of hemp's foot.

The experienced writer can quickly tell that here we have the beginning of a journey story. The main character Thog is already on his way, heading to the stone tower to bring Olafson medicine. Several years ago, this story was used by an experienced teacher with a class of higher attaining writers. Hugging closely would not have been appropriate at all so in the shared writing, the teacher modelled the notion of using

the basic idea of sending a main character on a quest but did not refer directly to the model. Here is the shared writing of the opening:

Radiant light struck the mosaic floor of the ruined abbey as Angelo slung his Apollo's bow across his shoulder, in preparation for his long awaited quest. Wrapping his wolf skin cape (cloak) around his numb body, Angelo swung open the arched, oak door. The perishing wind crept and whimpered, almost sweeping him off his unsteady feet.

You can only just tell that it comes from the same model. In this case, the opening paragraph introduces us to the main character and sets the scene as Angelo prepares to set off on his journey. Where or why, we have yet to discover.

Now let us look at the openings to three stories from this same class. They were all written during this opening lesson. The children are definitely 'shaking hands' with the model, using the basic idea but each one takes their own tack. The first opening is by Samuel and involves a character called Bugdom!

Bugdom's Journey

Tightly tying his shoe laces, Bugdom checked that all his necessaries were packed. He had been summoned by the Ladybird kingdom to free their Royal Family who had been captured by the Red Ant colony. He looked out in front of him towards the deserted wildness of the luscious garden. He was ready. Cautiously, Bugdom edged out of the palace and took the first steps of his quest.

It had been an hour since he had left and still the whole garden was quiet. Too quiet.

The repetition of 'too quiet' is most effective and begins to build the tension. This is a good example of a child drawing on a suspense toolkit. In the next example, Chloe has two characters and a horse called Lightning. She introduces the idea of a map and the knotty problem of defeating a plague!

Fall of The Plague

The sun was just a finger's breadth over the horizon as Tom, Amy and Lightning left the wizard's tower. Peering down at the magical map (a souvenir from the wizard), they planned their route. Tucking the map in Lightning's bag, Tom and Amy jumped upon his saddle. As the rickety bridge lowered, they made their way through the ill cheering crowd. "For the King!" they applauded awaiting approval. The harsh wind tugged at Lightning's wavy hair as they set off on their quest to defeat the plague. All that could be heard was the gentle cantering of Lightning's hooves and the spitting of stones, as dust weaved between them.

The third example is by Henry. His story opening is packed with ideas and may need some editing for clarification but he obviously enjoys creating this world where pixies just do not worry enough! Perhaps he has been reading Artemis Fowl?

The Journey

‘Clink’. Martin could still hear the letterbox ringing in his ears. That was the sound that changed his – Martin Valdez, backstreet boy of Brookside’s – life, that was the day when everything changed ...

A sharp shriek raised him from his slumber. Glancing around, Martin discovered where the ear-splitting shriek had come from. It was from Caw the crow, perched upon the tip of the cactus which was one of the only chances of shade in the whole desert. Carefully placing his hand-woven silk sheet into his backpack, Martin produced a flint knife from his jacket – its curved blade the same length from his wrist to his finger tips and its leather binding fitted perfectly for his slender fingers.

“Hurry up!” hissed Raven pausing momentarily before darting round the granite stone pillar toward the kitchens. (Her steps so graceful on the uneven flagstones.) The only sound that would give her away was the light padding of her delicate shoes.

“I’m coming, just don’t get caught!” I moaned to myself.

“You worry too much!” laughed Raven who had now appeared by the ancient oak door. Pixies! They don’t worry enough.

In this class, constant deep reading, high quality shared writing and a strong sense of commitment to writing has developed young writers mastering their craft. The shared writing is showing the children how to take an underlying plot idea, draw on the writing toolkits and create their own stories. This work is at the ‘innovation’ stage and the teacher is still using shared writing to involve the children in high-level composition. Once these stories have been completed, the children will then have the chance to write totally independently. They will have the advantage of the original model, the shared writing acting as a model as well as the sharing of their classmates’ stories. This happens because, at the end of the innovation stage, the children sit in ‘story circles’ and each child reads aloud a chosen part of their story.

The more that the children move away from the model and begin to just use the basic plot idea and related writing toolkit, the more they become independent as writers. In some sessions, they will be working on new aspects of writing but in many they will be expected to move away from the comfort of a model. Otherwise, the model is no longer a scaffold but becomes a constraint.

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