



Writing for Pleasure

There has been a lot talked about 'Reading for Pleasure' over the last year. Even the government recognises the significance of the link between reading for pleasure and attainment. Of course, if children, or any of us, love doing something then we are more likely to put in the practice and over time become more skilled. It makes me smile that whilst 'Reading for Pleasure' is enshrined in the National Curriculum, the powers that be have yet to make the same link into maths or science or 'Writing for Pleasure'.

Children are not really readers until they choose their own books to read; books that they want to read, developing their own taste for literature, poetry or non-fiction. In this way, they become readers, enjoying favourite books and developing a taste for certain authors as well as key books that they like to reread many times. By the same token, young writers also need to develop choice and inclination, deciding what they want to write about. In this way, writing becomes a vehicle for exploring and enjoying their own stories, fascinations, concerns and obsessions. We talk about what we want to talk about; we should also be able to write about what we want to write about. We write best about what we know and what matters.

Part 1 – Making time for invention

Plan and schedule time for your invention units

It is important to plan into the annual programme 'invention units' where children are given intriguing and rich starting points that they can then explore in different ways. For instance, one school took David Wiesner's picture book 'Tuesday'. Every class explored the book over a week. The year 6 children listed possible ways to respond to the book including writing ideas such as newspaper and TV reports, police reports, diary entries, letters, stories from different viewpoints, instructions and explanations about magical flight. Every child planned, drafted and edited over several days and then published their writing in different

formats. All the teacher required was that everyone had to produce some writing, a piece of art work and be in a small group to develop a short drama based on the text.

It is probably fair to say that years ago, we were pretty good at setting up exciting opportunities to stimulate writing but we probably did not spend enough time actually teaching writing. The pendulum has swung so far now that many children pass through a primary school with more than enough teaching but perhaps not enough opportunity to write for their own purposes, developing their own style, exploring their own concerns. Invention units should bring about a balance between being taught to write and having an opportunity to be a writer.

Don't put the focus on grammatical features

If every time children write they have to remember features to include in their writing then that inevitably makes writing a harder process and, in the end, makes children self-conscious as they write. They can never write from the heart. Imagine not being able to speak without having to remember to use certain features! We would probably end up with a nation of silent children, only daring to utter a few safe phrases or learned sentences. This undermines experimentation with language, through which language develops. It also means that children's writing is less likely to contain the sudden flare of imagination. They too often write with constraint rather than creativity.

Vary the invention

Some schools are developing a fixed routine for invention writing to ensure that it happens. When I taught, I liked to vary what happens, to keep the children on the edge of their seats, varying the ideas and approaches. This meant that I had to think creatively, setting up different situations and discovering what worked and what did not. Invention units should probably vary in length of time and approach so that teachers and children can think imaginatively.



Part 2 - Creating the inspiration to write

Trips out that lead into writing

Units may spring from starting points such as film, exploring a picture book, responding to a poem, novel or short story. Visitors could be interviewed and what they say turned into news reports, blogs, magazine articles, fact sheets or be woven into a story. Trips could be made that lead into writing. I have made a number of these special events with Stone Primary School. On one occasion we went on a dragon hunt. We visited Chepstow Castle to look for signs of dragons, stopped in the Forest of Dean by the giant's chair (part of the forest's sculpture trail) where I told a dragon story and we ended up creeping through Coleway Caves listening for dragons! This dragon poem was written during shared writing with a year 5 class. You can see the simple structure as we described different aspects of the dragon.

Xfilious

*Its scarlet eyes
scan the
pitch undergrowth,
like crystal flames
flickering, curved like
a curious cave,
possessed by mysteries.*

*Its jagged jaws
crawl, grinding
broken bones,
shredding fascinating flesh!*

*Dagger teeth
drip with venom
drizzling disaster
every stormy step it takes.*

*Scarred scales
are like dreaded diamonds
flexing, glistening in the
moonlight,
like shattered
mirrors of misery.*

*Curved talons grip,
illuminated menacingly
by stunned stars -
crafted by brutal blades.*

*Scalpel spines slope,
zigzagging wildly
like a staircase of
shark fins.*

*Crouching
at the monstrous mouth
of its lethal lair,
Xfilious
glares
into the petrified eyes
of darkness and
whispers words of warning... – Debbie 10
years*

Using simple objects to trigger writing

Of course, great writing does not have to be triggered by trips or elaborate plots. Objects make wonderful triggers to the imagination. Prop up a rusty bicycle – draw it and then use it as a springboard into descriptive writing. Drawing means that the children have to look closely, noticing details. This meditative process probably helps to place the subject into the child's imagination. The process of writing then requires the use of words to 'say what things look like' (Sally, 9 years). Even simple things like drawing a shoe or your hand can lead into interesting writing.



Use emotions, feelings and real experiences to produce powerful writing

Mark was 8 years old when he wrote:

*My hand curls up.
My knuckles swell,
like a football
being pumped up.
My fist clenches
ready to collect my revenge.
My fingers bow to the king.
The smallest of them all.
The king is the thumb.*

When I asked him what he was thinking about, he told me, 'Sherriff stole my football at playtime and I'm going to get him'!

Props and setting up a scenario that engages pupils

Years ago, I discovered a doorframe in a skip and lugged it into the classroom. Children wrote Narnia stories and the idea of the 'portal story' was born. One year, I read a Year 3 class *The Borrowers*. As a piece of fun, I left a tiny envelope and letter in the classroom for someone to find. The next thing I knew, I was engaged in a massive correspondence with children writing tiny letters to the Borrowers and I made the mistake of replying! In the end, it all got out of hand and so I sent them on a journey across the local fields.... Sadly, they never returned!

In my first year 5 class, I had a massive curiosity box where I stored all sorts of unusual artefacts. I spent hours at car boot sales and poking around in second-hand shops. I collected curios – tiny shoes, an old camera, a box with a unicorn on the lid, coloured bottles, a silver ring, an ancient wallet, old maps, buttons, leaf skeletons, a dance card from the Titanic, the inside of a clockwork machine, an old clock and so on. Every so often, we would lug out the box and children could choose what they wanted to write about. By then, the class had at their fingertips a range of possibilities: they could use the object in a poem, a story, an article, a news

item, a conversation, a monologue, a letter or a diary entry. The teaching could be drawn upon to liberate the writing.

Skeleton leaf

*Lifeless like tissue
laces neatly threaded
gentle, fragile
the silk delicate embroidery
the veins spreading
network carefully stitched
bone like witch's
fingers
backbone gentle and
tender*

Sally 9 years

The Phone

*Hard, black and shiny
waiting silently
for you to dial, slowly and steadily.
As you put the receiver to your ear
it gently purrs, like a cat
Washing itself.*

Claire, 9 years

The Compass

*Its slick silver slit legs
slither apart
a ballet-dancer
accomplishes the splits*

Kyron 10 years



Visualising and drawing into writing

With my second Year 3 class, I played them the beginning of 'Under Milk Wood' by Dylan Thomas but read aloud by Richard Burton. Everyone draw maps of their invented village. They wrote diary entries, descriptions and even the contents of the postman's bag – letters, postcards and a telegram. Thomas's incantations are direct invitations into the play but also into creating your own visions, 'Only you can hear ...' and 'Only you can see ...'. Interestingly, listening to such a fine reading and our gentle choral chanting of the opening seemed to stay in their writing rhythms and crept out on many other occasions. It was as if we had somehow placed Thomas's genius irrevocably inside of their imaginative and linguistic competency.

Making links with other classes and schools

One year, in a village school where I taught 35 children from 6 to 11 years old, we created a display for another small school. What would they be interested in? Children decided on what they would do, spent time writing and drawing. On the allotted day, I drove our display to the other school and returned with their display. My class were quite critical about what was worth reading, how well the writing was executed, appreciating most of all a section of jokes!

Using postcards and simple images

The other very potent starting point was my collection of postcards. Whenever, I visited an art gallery I always bought half a dozen cards. Eventually this has built into a mighty collection of some thousand or so but when I started teaching, I had 40 cards. I would spread these out and children chose which one to use. They might pretend that the image was the front cover of the book and write the title and blurb. They might pretend it was an illustration and write the facing page. It might trigger a poem describing the image or a playful poem. It might start or end a story or just become a paragraph. They could write the paragraph that accompanied the image and then write what happened just before and what happened next. Surreal images worked well, intriguing scenes

and portraits. Quite often, we would choose one image and, as a class, I would use shared writing to brainstorm ideas and then collectively pursue the idea to a full piece of writing. In this way, I modeled how to write independently, opening up the possibilities, especially if their writing was becoming repetitive or too cosy.

The Rooster and the Hen

(after a painting by Ito Jakuchu)

The tree is a dragon.

Red stems are blazing fire.

The feathers are a wild snake.

Their smooth layers are ridged scales.

The crown of the rooster rocks unsteadily

like the blade of a whisker.

*Long strips of grass lie scattered
among the sharp uneven daggers.*

*Clusters of leaves shake
crisp veins of the unknown.*

*Active eyeballs alert,
straining the minute bead.*

Shaded berries burst beneath nimble bones.

The rooster struts nearby.

*Deep pale beds overlap
the shelter of the mushroom.*

Natalie 11 years



Part 3 – Bringing it all together

All of this works well when teachers work close to a child's sense of excitement about their work and its endless possibilities. The world offers itself up for inspection and play. Our imagination is built through our close and careful study of the world. We filter observation of the moment and memory through the imaginative lens that translates experience, real or imagined, into the occasion of poetry, story or other forms of writing. The young writer learns how to trawl their inner and outer world for possibilities.

The importance of having quality class reading materials

Of course, independent writing flourishes on the back of teaching writing as well as a rich vein of reading. The teacher needs to constantly read to the class widely, discussing and modelling possibilities. We can make explicit the sorts of things that writing can do, building the children's repertoire. Writing can riddle, lie, surprise, capture memories, tell stories, personify, question, exclaim, boast, advertise, diminish, make the ordinary extraordinary, replicate, alter and transform the world so that children increasingly free their imaginations and write expansively. Only the finest books will do and each text must earn its place. Indeed, to improve the quality of reading and writing, every teacher needs to provide more challenging books and poems.

Quality reading leads to quality writing

In this extract, from a longer story written at home, we can easily tell who this year 4 writer has been reading.

As I stare at the broken bed, how I remember taking the shells away from the lonely beach and placing them gently onto the bed. I hated the cold feeling so I walked slowly down the stairs. I asked Aunt Maggie for a hot drink of cocoa.

She fetched an old book that lay upon her blue shelf. I asked her what it was. She said, "I do everything my way, now Uncle Freddy's boat is lost on the dark, shark sea."

I did not know what she meant by that. She handed me a parcel in brown paper. She said, 'These are for you. That's all I could buy.'

I replied, 'I do not mind. They're lovely,' turning the prayer book and shawl over in my cold hands.

The gentle tone is an echo from her reading of Morpurgo's books, probably 'The Wreck of the Zanzibar' or 'Why the Whales Came'. The 'dark, shark sea' is surely a direct echo of Dylan Thomas's famous line about, 'the sloebblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea'. She has loved the book so much that she wants to own the stories, to possess them, almost as if she had written them herself. So she writes in his style, with the same gentle cadences and literary style. The reading and the writing are woven together.

'Reading as a writer'

None of this will happen if children do not see themselves as writers and enjoy writing. A writer views the world as a writer, seeking what might be useful and noting it. They also read as writers, seeking out new avenues for their own writing, raiding their reading. The danger of independent writing is that it could just be the chore of having to do another piece of writing, but this time there is no teaching to help you.

Consider how the children themselves view and talk about writing

If we look at these children's reflections on writing, we can sense how they see themselves as writers. One Year 6 child from Stone Primary writes, drawing on Ted Hughes: 'The art of writing is to make your reader's imagination go into action. It is one of those curious facts that when two things are compared in a metaphor or similes you see them much more distinctly. A comparison is like a puzzle. When you say, 'his hair was like a rough coconut', it makes your imagination work! You are forced to look more closely.'

Lynn Eldred, 11 years, reflects on her process as a writer: 'Sometimes if a poem is more complicated, it helps me to have an example



read out to me or if it is a more descriptive piece to have a picture in front of me that I could refer to. It also helps me to write pieces of writing out in rough because then I can get better ideas and I can add more feeling to it and change words that I don't need or that I don't want'.

In the same class, Alison knows the value of talk, *'Before I start a piece of writing, I find it helps to talk about it first, because it sort of makes my mind clear about what I've got to do.'* She also is a great magpie, *'I prefer to work in a noisy room because sometimes the words people use in their speech can help create a realistic atmosphere.'* However, Leyla states, *'I like doing a poem in a quiet place so that I can think of words ... my best ideas come from the other poems I've done and the mistakes I've made'.*

I believe that this shift in teaching means that we have to develop ourselves as writer-teachers, enjoying creating with and for the class. Of course, what I am describing – the genuine development of the young writer – will only work when teachers cease providing children with endless lists of grammatical features that have to be used in their writing. If we teach effectively, then those features will begin to appear, drawn upon as techniques from great writers, and be increasingly used effectively as part of the writer's repertoire.

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