

Teaching writing

By Ruth Everett

Pupils need to master many different forms of writing across the curriculum in all key stages.

In upper KS2, there is an increased focus on *expository* writing. This is writing that is used to explain, describe or inform, for example essays, newspaper articles, instruction manuals.

In key stages 3 and 4, disciplinary writing instruction should be seen as inseparable from the teaching of the curriculum. So, there needs to be a focus on helping pupils develop a systematic way in which their writing responds to the questions posed in specific subjects.

For example, how a pupil might respond with the use of prose in history contrasts to the demands of science where pupils need to answer more succinctly using bullet points. Each approach requires development over time so that pupils can demonstrate their knowledge using the different writing approaches.

Given the importance of writing across the curriculum, it is essential that all teachers, regardless of phase and subject, are teachers of writing.

But what makes writing so challenging?

David McCullough, two-time Pulitzer prize winner, explains why writing poses challenges for pupils. *“Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That’s why it’s so hard.”*

As in reading, there are many **components** which must be explicitly taught if a pupil is to become an effective **writer** including *handwriting, punctuation, spelling, word choices, paragraphing, imagery, word inferences*.

Therefore, you need to break down the basics of writing instruction into **smaller chunks**. Too often, pupils are expected to tackle more complex tasks, like writing an essay, before they have all the knowledge they require, resulting in an overload of their working memory. The impact of this is the pupil’s effort is not focused on the content of the lesson, but on the structure and organisation of the piece of writing. To prevent this, you can scaffold the structure so teaching the content becomes the primary focus.

How you scaffold writing is likely to be subject specific. For example, an Art teacher might explicitly model the skill of writing detailed **annotations** of sketches whereas a science teacher might model how to write an effective conclusion including Tier 3 vocabulary or an English teacher might model how to use a **non-finite verb** after a quotation to clarify understanding and develop a learner’s analytical skills.

Therefore, pupils should be taught how to write for different purposes and be given a significant amount of time to practise these domain-specific writing skills.

How can you teach effective writing?

Pupils need to understand that writing is a **process** not a singular activity. A good piece of writing is **planned, drafted and edited**. These stages are best taught using explicit teaching methods

such as **modelling whilst thinking aloud**. To effectively model the writing process, you need to use high-quality, clear and succinct oral language.

Therefore, it is helpful to plan, script and rehearse what you will say when modelling.

Why is modelling so important when teaching writing?

Modelling and thinking aloud helps you to articulate some of the meta-cognitive approaches that happen automatically for you, and for some pupils, but not for others. Talking through your thought processes makes discreet steps explicit so pupils can understand the steps they need to take throughout the writing process.

Working with colleagues is a great way to practise modelling, so you can become adept at this important but difficult skill.

Another evidence-based strategy you can use when modelling is to provide pupils with a worked example on a visualiser or Inter Active Whiteboard. This could be one of their peer's successful pieces of writing. You can then highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the whole text, for example, *vocabulary, a subordinate clause, an effective topic sentence*. This way, the successful elements are labelled by deconstructing the text into its building blocks. Pupils can then see:

- **how** a good piece of writing is created
- and what the features are of an effective written piece.

It is important to pitch this right to inspire rather than dishearten.

In summary, writing is a complex process, comprised of *three* main phases: **planning, drafting** and **editing**. *Each* phase needs to be explicitly taught by all teachers and broken down into chunks to avoid over burdening learners' working memories. All too often, the most important phases - planning and editing - are only taught as a one-off activity.

You should embed writing instruction into the **content** of your curriculum and focus writing activities on what pupils are currently learning and reading about to ensure they have the prior knowledge required to successfully complete the written task.