

Talk for Writing

'Talk for Writing' (T4W) is based on the thinking and creative processes involved in 'being a writer', including knowing how to generate and develop ideas; drawing on a breadth of reading; and understanding how to draft, refine and improve writing. For experienced writers, many of these processes are internal and automatic. However, young writers benefit from explicit exploration of these processes through supportive talk, so as to share the thinking involved in creating writing. T4W also involves the oral learning of model texts and the oral development of new versions so that children internalise the language patterns that they need for writing, adding to their linguistic competency.

Imitation

The sequence for teaching writing begins with assessment, 'the 'cold' task. Children are asked to 'have a go' at writing an example of the text type to be taught, e.g. a persuasive letter. The 'cold tasks' are assessed by the teacher so that planning includes what has to be taught to the whole class, what different groupings need as well as setting individual targets. Teaching and learning is sharply focused on progress. At the end of the unit, children repeat the initial task and 'show what they know' (the 'hot' task). This final piece of independent writing reveals the progress that has been made.

Once the teacher knows what needs to be taught, a unit is designed. It begins with an imaginative 'hook' to motivate and engage the children, often providing a purpose and audience for writing. For instance, a class of 6-year-old children found a message inside a bottle from a stranded family. They were asked to help by writing stories to keep the family amused as well as finding out information about different creatures. The teacher maintained this initial impetus by using filmed messages from the 'family'.

A model text (350 – 400 words) is created, building in the features needed for progress. This is learned orally using a text map and actions so that children internalise the language patterns. Teachers devise activities to help the children engage with the text and to deepen understanding through drama, writing-in-role, discussion and by creating relevant role-play areas.

Once the children know the text well (having told it as a class, in groups and pairs), they are able to read and discuss the text. For younger pupils, this can be presented as a homemade 'big' book and for older pupils it may be viewed on the screen. Several days are spent using shared reading to discuss shades of meaning, developing understanding, inferring and deducing. Further models may also be shared so that pupils broaden their frame of reference through investigating how other writers tackle this type of writing. This phase is known as 'reading as a reader'.

This is followed by 'reading as a writer' which involves identifying the underlying patterns – both the overall organisation as well as identifying how the writer creates different effects. The text is 'boxed up' so that the structure becomes obvious and can be used as a basic planner. 'Writing toolkits' are also created and these contain transferrable writing strategies and techniques.

Throughout the 'imitation' phase, the children work on daily spelling, vocabulary building and sentence work in relation to the initial assessments of their writing as well as the demands of the text type. Children are not just bathed in language but specifically notice, rehearse and learn language patterns needed to write powerfully.

Innovation

Once the children have heard, spoken, drawn, dramatised, read, discussed and investigated the text, they are ready to move into 'innovation'. This phase involves teaching the children to plan, draft and edit a version of the model text.

Younger and less confident children benefit from changing their text map and retelling their new version before writing. This has to be modelled by the teacher. Older pupils will use their boxed up planners to develop a new text – again, modelled by the teacher. Retelling their new version before writing helps children to develop their ideas. Less confident writers hug closely to the original, making a few simple changes. The more confident move away from the model, embellishing, altering, reordering, changing key ideas and even writing prequels and sequels in the 'style' of the model. All of this has to be taught by the teacher.

The act of writing is broken down into stages over a number of days. A narrative might well take a week to complete. Each day, the teacher uses interactive, shared composition so that the writing process can be made explicit. At this stage, the teaching is focused on generating and crafting the composition. Older children use 'magpie books' and continually take notes, jotting down words and phrases that might be used when they come to write. A teaching assistant (or confident spellers) creates a 'save it box' of suggested ideas. Independent writing follows this immediately. The teacher works with a group, guiding their composition so that every child has an opportunity to benefit from focused teaching, pitched at their level.

Every day begins with feedback. The visualizer is used for whole class feedback, focusing on several examples. This leads into children editing their writing on their own or with a response partner. Again, the teacher works on editing with a group. Teachers mark using 2 colours, highlighting in one colour 'what works well' and in another colour 'what needs to be improved or made accurate'. This means that the teacher's marking leads to a direct and immediate improvement in the quality of writing. Children use 'polishing pens' to edit their writing so that the teacher's marking leads to action – either editing or into a 'mini lesson', picking up on common misconceptions or errors. The week ends with children reading their writing round small circles so that everyone's composition is shared.

The aim is not for children to write copiously but to craft their writing to create an effect upon the reader, writing accurately. They draw upon the model text, other known texts and the shared writing, making use of a spelling card, drawing on vocabulary and spelling banks as well as relevant sentence work. A key element in a T4W class will be the 'learning wall' or 'washing line'. This is split into 3 sections – *imitation*, *innovation* and *invention*. The teacher displays what will help the children achieve, e.g. the text map, model text, spelling and sentence patterns, vocabulary, the boxed up planner, writing toolkits and shared writing. The display needs to be legible and teachers model its use.

Invention

Finally children move into invention where they write the text type independently or apply what has been learned across the curriculum. A first-hand experience or powerful stimulus will be needed. Further

teaching may be required as well as feedback. Several ‘inventions’ are written and the most successful edited for publishing. There should also be many opportunities for independent writing within a rich and engaging curriculum that provides experiences worth writing about.

Other key aspects

Schools must also ensure that they have developed a strong handwriting style, systematic daily phonics/spelling sessions. Phonics must be applied into spelling. Each T4W school has daily guided and shared reading sessions. The school develops a ‘literature spine’ that identifies core picture books, novels and poetry to be studied each year. These are drawn upon and referred to as ‘mentor texts’ whilst writing is taught, being explored through drama, writing-in-role and ‘book talk’. Younger children learn a ‘poem of the week’ and older pupils perform a ‘poem of the day’.

Nursery children learn stories and rhymes, using the same techniques of drawing and using actions. Toys, costumes and props are provided so that they can ‘play at’ the stories. They also ‘invent’ daily through play. Adults skilfully intervene in play, to model storymaking as well as opening up the possibilities. Every day, several children have their story written down in the class storybook. Their tale is then shared with the group and acted out. Younger children often need toys and objects to help them choose and invent. At least once a week, the teacher leads the class in an invention, recorded as a map or written down. These are turned into a ‘big book’ for reading. The more children are engaged in storymaking, witnessing map making and writing, the more they show interest in early writing. The youngest children develop an ear for sounds and are introduced to ‘letters and sounds’ as well as pencil control.

Talk for Writing has transformed many schools. Where children might be expected to struggle, it has been shown that the approach, mixed with a high quality phonics/spelling and reading programme, means that almost every child learns to read and write proficiently and with pleasure. It is most effective as a whole school system that is continually developed in relation to the children’s needs and with staff discovering what helps children make progress.

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