

Improving writing, with a particular focus on supporting boys' writing development

Improving writing and reducing the gap between attainment in reading and writing remains a significant challenge facing schools and children in terms of raising further standards of attainment in English by the end of Key Stage 2. Within the overall issue of raising attainment in writing, there is a particular issue about raising the attainment of boys in writing and addressing underperformance in writing for individuals and groups of children. This document seeks to support schools in addressing this issue.

When focusing on improving writing, it is important to remember the interdependence of the four aspects of communication: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Speaking and listening, as well as being important skills in their own right, underpin reading and writing development.

Most children try out ideas in talk long before they are able to try to pin them down in writing. Reading aloud helps children to become familiar with the cadences and uses of English. For many children expressing ideas orally is easier than in writing, where it is more complicated to orchestrate all the necessary skills. The discipline of writing, which involves precision and clear articulation of meaning for a distant reader, aids clarity in oral communication, too. Reading gives children models of language, and discussion of texts helps them to take such language into their own repertoire. So, speaking and listening, reading and writing are not only interdependent, but also mutually enhancing.

There is a growing evidence base of 'what works' in supporting children's writing development and the references below all provide accessible, 'tried and tested' and relevant guidance to support you in improving the teaching of writing in your context.

Writing flyers

Key messages from Primary National Strategy Boys' writing flyers

Talk for writing: key principles

- Children learning English as an additional language benefit from orally rehearsing writing.
- Children need to activate knowledge of what they are going to write about. This can be done in a first or additional language.
- Children need to experience language being used in order to be able to use it effectively themselves.
- Talk for writing can be used across the curriculum.
- Boys and girls may communicate in different ways. We can make the most of the differences by planning a variety of different groups, pairings and seating arrangements.
- The collaborative skills developed through talk for writing can be used in social as well as academic situations.
- Drama is a successful tool to stimulate writing at all ages.
- Talk for writing is most effective when it is a carefully planned, and thoroughly prepared, part of learning.
- The teacher/practitioner's own talk can be a powerful way of demonstrating for writing.

Signing and alternative means of communication should be used where appropriate.

Purpose and audience: key principles

- Build on boys' enjoyment and motivation through ICT, film and visual texts.
- Make explicit links between visual texts and a written outcome.
- Teach understanding/vocabulary of media structures to support the writing sequence.
- Discuss images and pictures to generate wider vocabulary.
- Develop children's visual skills through games and role-play.

Visual texts: key principles

- From the Foundation Stage onwards ensure that 'real' writing activities are planned for.
- Plan that each literacy session/activity is part of a cohesive unit of work and is not just a 'one-off'.
- Make boys aware of the purpose of each task within the unit, in particular how a skill or concept can be applied to other learning, or in another curriculum area.
- Demonstrate how skills learned in word-level and sentence-level teaching are applied in 'real' writing activities.
- Ensure that the audience for writing is made clear and that, wherever possible, the audience goes beyond the immediate classroom/setting environment.
- Facilitate 'partner peer-review' during writing sessions so that children are kept aware of the importance of revisiting their work to make changes and improvements.
- Create real opportunities for audience involving parents and carers.

Feedback on learning

- Learning objectives, success criteria and curricular targets provide a framework for feedback on learning.
- Involving boys in creating success criteria for writing provides them with clear expectations.
- Paired assessment and self-assessment are ways of engaging boys in understanding their progress in learning, and identifying next steps.
- Boys need to be supported so that they learn how to give effective feedback to each other.
- Time needs to be built into literacy activities for giving oral and written feedback and for boys to reflect and act on feedback.
- One of the most effective forms of feedback is to focus on success and improvement.
- Whole-group shared marking allows for discussion and analysis in a secure environment.

Ofsted: Messages on improving boys' writing

Messages on improving writing from Ofsted. *Yes he can. Schools where boys write well* (Ofsted report, published July 2003)

This report focused on schools with effective strategies for raising attainment in writing for boys. The findings addressed the following aspects.

Curriculum planning and teaching groups

While planning the curriculum, it is important that:

- there is a balance within the curriculum between an emphasis on 'skills' and a focus on content, meaning and impact of writing
- schemes of work for English and across the curriculum provide for a wide range of genres to be studied and practised
- the curriculum includes approaches to learning that feel 'active', such as drama, working with media texts and ICT, etc.

Assessment

In marking and feedback to children, value is placed on:

- diverse responses/attempts, including some boys' preferred style of humour, action-packed adventure, macabre, etc.
- succinctness as much as elaboration, where appropriate to the task
- presentation and accuracy (neither too much nor too little)
- high-quality marking which provides clear feedback
- well-developed teacher knowledge which informs assessment.

Teaching and learning

Factors of teaching and learning identified as particularly effective include the following:

- Writing tasks are broken down into smaller steps, with feedback/discussion at each stage.
- Some writing is directed to specific audiences beyond the teacher and purposes beyond mere exercise of skills.
- Skilful links are made between reading and writing, so features of text noted and modelled (by shared text or teacher models) find their way into boys' writing.
- Oral work is used well as a prelude to, and accompaniment to, writing, with conscious teaching of vocabulary.
- There is a balance between support (plans, frames, collaboration, etc.) and independence is well maintained with scaffolding provided as appropriate.
- There are offers of choice of topic or content (so valuing individual ideas) but with clarity over the form required.
- There is a balance between 'timed' pieces (plan and final text) and re-drafted work with no routine re-drafting.
- The teachers' good knowledge of language and writing pedagogy underpins this 'balance'.

Children's response (characteristics observed):

- Enthusiasm and perseverance with tasks.
- Children are keen to share, discuss and publish their work.
- Pride taken in the quality of their work (including presentation, but mainly the style and content).
- Respect for the writing and views of others.
- Positive reaction to feedback from teacher and peers, motivated by the desire to improve.

Effective schools

In effective schools, the following factors are identified:

- Headteachers are actively engaged in leading the learning and teaching of writing, conveying their aspirations with a clear vision and high expectations.
- Teachers place high emphasis not just on children acquiring specific writing skills but also on promoting engagement and pleasure in writing, and they know what to do when a child seems unmotivated to write.
- Assessment for learning is used to find out how well children are writing and how to help them improve.
- Data is analysed to identify strengths and specific areas for development. This information should underpin the selection of curricular targets.
- Age-related expectations are understood and used to challenge low expectations of improvements in writing.
- Progress in writing is regularly monitored and interventions are implemented as necessary, making use of Early Literacy Support, Further Literacy Support and the recently developed Year 3 Literacy Support intervention.

Evidence for improving writing in the Primary Framework for literacy

Evidence gained from Primary Strategy work with local authorities (LAs) and their work with schools

Summary of LA support considered to have the greatest impact

The support considered to have produced the greatest impact included:

- using data to target consultant support to those schools with significant underperformance in boys' writing
- supporting headteachers and subject leaders to develop effective tracking systems of children's progress and to identify and monitor those not making expected progress
- providing school-based support for implementing layered curricular targets for writing, focusing specifically on linking targets to planning and teaching
- adopting a focus on improving boys' writing as part of the Primary Leadership Programme support
- establishing 'Improving boys' writing' projects with targeted groups of schools
- providing continuing professional development (CPD) focusing on developing speaking and listening to enhance writing (many LAs were using Primary National Strategy speaking, listening and learning materials to support improved writing)
- providing CPD focusing on the use of visual literacies to support boys' writing
- ensuring that ICT is integrated into both literacy training and consultant support to enhance writing
- 'motivating reluctant writer' courses – use of drama, comics, picture books, film.

Successful strategies impacting on improvements in boys' writing identified by improving schools

LAs asked their most improving schools to identify the key actions impacting on improvements in boys' writing, which included:

- having boys' writing – or writing in general – as a formal whole-school improvement target, with several schools linking this to teachers' performance management objectives
- implementing whole-school, year group and children's group writing targets with clear guidance about how to progress further
- using leading teachers to support class-based work
- developing more explicit planning of speaking and listening/drama activities - before writing begins as oral rehearsal prior to formal recording
- making effective use of Further Literacy Support and Year 6 booster sessions
- providing more opportunities for boys (and children in general) to make choices about their writing tasks
- establishing systems for regular work scrutiny
- seeing teaching of writing as a series of incremental, modelled skills, 'not a mystical art'
- ensuring the use of 'boy-friendly' texts, high-quality resources and use of ICT, particularly interactive whiteboards
- developing the use of writing partners
- providing regular opportunities for extended writing.

Resources for Improving writing

Further resources

The resources listed below have been written to offer additional approaches and resources to support you in your ambition to improve the quality of learning and teaching of writing in your school.

[Raising boys' achievement in writing](#)

[Boys' writing flyers](#)

[Raising standards in writing: achieving children's targets](#)

Case studies:

Boys' writing: [Year 3 The Iron Giant](#)

Boys' writing: [Year 4 Stories for another culture](#)

Excellence and Enjoyment: Learning and teaching for bilingual children in the primary years (Ref: 0013-2006)

Excellence and enjoyment: Learning and teaching in the primary years (ref: 0521-2004)
