

## RATIONALE:

### What is the 'Primary Writing Project'?

The aim of the 'Primary Writing Project' is to motivate children and teachers as writers, deepening understanding about writing and refining skills so that children make good progress and standards are raised. The project is based on clusters of schools, with a similar interest in improving writing, working collaboratively over time. Each school has a 'project team' that meets regularly, developing and lead the project in school. Every teacher and teaching assistant will also have whole day training sessions.

Experience from other such projects suggests that where all teachers embark on the core strategies, spend time collaboratively refining each key aspect and deepening their understanding, schools begin to establish whole-school systems that they have found to be highly effective in raising standards. A key element of the project is to establish processes from previous projects that have proved effective, in order to create a coherent approach to teaching writing.

The project is a whole-school, cumulative and systematic process for teaching writing, based on what has been developed in many schools, to help children make faster progress and gain confidence as well as pleasure in becoming writers.

### Why reading and 'talking the text' matter.

The best writers in any class are always readers. Indeed, it would be impossible to write a text type without being familiar with the language rhythms and patterns. So reading influences writing – indeed, the richness, depth and breadth of reading shapes and determines the writer that we become. If a child's reading is meagre then their writing will inevitably be thin. Most teachers would be able to take a pile of children's books and rapidly work out which children read and which do not - for their writing is an echo of their reading. In fact, it is possible to work out their favourite author or type of writing, as their composition may well be an echo of Jacqueline Wilson, Anthony Horowitz or Terry Deary.

So - children who write proficiently are always readers. It is impossible to write a text type without being familiar with the language patterns. Indeed, it is impossible to write a sentence pattern without being able to say it – and you cannot say it, without hearing it. Language is primarily learned through interactive 'hearing' and 'saying'. Talk can then be enhanced by constant reading and may, ultimately, be shaped by writing.

- Children who are read to regularly before coming to school are the most likely to succeed in education;
- Children who read for pleasure are also most likely to succeed - in literacy, but also across the curriculum because of the way in which reading develops the ability to think in the abstract.

It is almost as if a rich reading experience of stories, poems and non-fiction, helps children to internalise a living library, templates that are drawn upon when composing. For instance, even the earliest stories of young children who have been read to, involve them in drawing upon their reading as well as their immediate lives. Here is Poppy who is just three:

*'Well, Pops was going to collect some berries and some conkers and she was going to collect some fir cones then she met a monkey and then she met a tiger. Then she met her grandma. Then she met the elephant. Then she met the lion. Then she met her father and then she met her mummy. Then she went to Flosy Mopsy. Then Flosy Mopsy and Peter Rabbit went outside to collect some berries, fire cones and conkers and while they were walking they saw some coconuts falling to the ground and they collected some and then they went home. Then they played. When it was night, the little girl went bed. It was morning time in the early evening so they went to playgroup.'*

Already her stories are full of everyday events such as picking berries in the autumn and the impending visit of her Gran, mingled with the current favourite story of Peter Rabbit. Children cannot create out of nothing. There needs to be both rich experience as well as a language bank inside the mind, to draw upon.

### What about the imagination?

Teachers may be tempted into thinking that children are unimaginative. However, the issue is usually not a lack of imagination. Too often it is a lack of the building blocks for with which to be imaginative – with stories this would be characters, settings and possibilities. Imagination concerns manipulating what you know to create something new. However, it is not uncommon to find children arriving in school with a meagre diet of stories and rhymes, let alone non-fiction. Indeed, many professionals who work with young children believe that language deprivation is increasing.

It is this concern about helping to provide children with a language rich environment that will enable them to thrive as writers and learners that led to the development of the 'talk for writing' approach. Learning texts orally, and building up a bank of texts through reading, helps children to:

- build their imaginative world;
- internalise vocabulary, the flow of sentences and text patterns needed for writing.

The 'talk for writing' approach is based upon how children learn language through 'memorable, meaningful, repetition'. Constant experience of stories helps children internalise narrative patterns:

- The story as an experience of memorable, meaningful images;
- The underlying template of a story – the plot pattern;
- The building blocks – characters (with their goals and struggles), settings, events as well as openings and endings;
- The flow of the sentences – syntax;
- Vocabulary – especially memorable sensory detail and connectives.

We should not lose sight of the notion that stories pass on cultural values, allowing readers to revisit and broaden their experience. They provide route maps to life so that we can better understand and explain ourselves to the world and the world to ourselves. Stories can help children make sense of the inexplicable. They may bring comfort or disturbance. A good story stays in the mind forever, making the child's inner world a larger space.

However, those who struggle with language may well have not yet built up that storehouse of narrative possibilities. Storytelling and 'talking the text' has to be a daily routine – it is as important as phonics. Indeed, what is the point of segmentation becoming a skill without a story to write!

The roots of ‘talking into writing’ The initial work on ‘Storymaking’ was carried out at the International Learning and Research Centre, funded by the then DFES through the Innovations unit, as well as being supported by CFBT. It was co-led by Mary Rose and Pie Corbett. It was an attempt to explore a systematic, cumulative and dynamic approach to second language learning. This was based on work carried out at the University of Rome by Professor Taeschner. It was then followed by teacher research into the link between storytelling and writing, funded by the ‘innovations unit’ at the Department for Education.

The simple idea was that children would learn a story orally in their own language and then learn the same story in the new language. Gradually, we realised that not only was this helping children acquire the rhythms and patterns of another language but also it was having a considerable influence on children’s talk and writing. Because the stories were repeated many times, in order to embed the texts, children were picking up on key patterns which were then reproduced in their play, conversation and writing. Teachers noticed children recycling vocabulary and phrases, playing with ideas from favourite tales and rhymes.

### What is ‘Talk for Writing’?

‘Talk for Writing’ is built around a simple enough notion. What would happen if we took a primary school and decided that every day children would spend 15 or 20 minutes storytelling. In a reception class, they might well learn and develop about 10 stories. This could be built upon in year 1 with another ten and, thereafter, perhaps a story every half term. This would provide every child with a bank of about 50 stories that they know really well. If you add in a similar number of non-fiction texts and then include poetry, the language and imaginative store becomes fairly extensive.

#### Talk for writing – phase 1 - Imitation

Learning stories orally is a powerful tool for helping the child to internalise the language. Whilst reading is also necessary, it can become a passive activity. Oral learning of texts involves the children in hearing and speaking the text. These are taught in a multi-sensory manner, using story maps (visual representation) and actions (kinaesthetic). The stories are repeated again and again – as a class, in groups and by pairs. Fairly rapidly, children become familiar with the story and find it easier to retell independently. Interestingly, because they have learned the stories word for word, they are less likely to string their retellings together with ‘and then’, and are more likely to retell in specific sentence patterns.

- Learn a story orally as a class, in groups and pairs;
- Use story maps and actions to support learning.

Some teachers may feel that this sounds like rote-learning and could be dull. However, where teachers tell stories with expression so too do the children, for their retelling, rhythm and expression reflects the teacher’s voice. Furthermore, this repetitive approach echoes what happens to young children who are read to at home when they pass through a phase (at about 2-3 years old) when they demand the same favourite again and again. Indeed, the story is repeated so often that the children learn the story word for word. Of course, many aspects of life involve the comfort of repetition. For instance, I love listening to certain songs again and again, even though I know every word, every note. Repeated patterning can be comforting but is also a key aspect of learning.

It is vital that the children understand what the words mean. Otherwise, the telling is hollow chanting. This involves using props, images, video clips, dramatisation, discussion, drawing, modelling making, baking gingerbread, making porridge and going out on a proper bear hunt! Relevant costumes and toys can be provided for children to use when ‘playing at the story’. The teacher has to think carefully about which aspects of a story might need explaining, demonstrating or enacting to support understanding.

- Use play, drama, discussion, writing in role and other activities to deepen understanding of the story.
- Vary retelling, using expression.

Ensuring that the stories are understood is crucial to the process because otherwise the language patterns will not be transferrable. We learn language in part through straightforward ‘imitation’ of what we hear. However, the concept of ‘generative grammar’ describes how the mind creates new utterances, based on well-known underlying syntactical patterns. The brain has the extraordinary ability to take a well known pattern such as, *‘Once upon a time there was a little red hen who lived on a farm’* and then use this as a basis for creating an endless variety of similar sentences, such as, *‘Once upon a time there was a little old man who lived on the edge of a forest’*. However, ‘generative grammar’ only works when the children understand what the words mean. So, ‘Talk for Writing’ is underpinned by the notion of learning language through – ‘memorable, meaningful repetition’.

- Build into the stories key language patterns such as connectives and ‘story patterns’ that you want the children to learn.
- Re-use the language patterns when innovating and changing the story.

In terms of children’s language development, this process becomes very powerful when the teachers and assistants also use the key language features in everyday class contexts. In this way, children hear structures being used repetitively, in different circumstances, and therefore begin to internalise what is being said. Their own attempts at using such features should be encouraged, recast if needed (into standard English) and repeated with some development. For instance, teachers have found that targeting connectives in a very focussed manner can be a highly effective way of developing children’s language. Usually though, vocabulary, connectives and sentence patterns are listed on the class wall but never modelled by the teacher.

Once the stories (rhymes/non-fiction texts) have been internalised and explored, the children can then read them. Big books can be created and older children read the texts as handouts. Of course, because every child knows the text orally, every child is more confident in reading what is written down. Texts are then discussed and other examples may be read, broadening the children’s frame of reference by considering how other authors tackle the same writing challenge. Children will also be trained to read with a writer’s eye, co-constructing how texts are structured and what language features and techniques are being used to create different effects.

- Read as a reader: - Once the story is internalised, read the text (Big Book, on screen or as handout); - Read and discuss, deepening understanding; - Read other examples of the text type.

- Read as a Writer to work out how the text was structured ('boxing up' and what language features and writing techniques were used 'Writing toolkits'. This is then published on a working wall or 'washing line' – you can see a few examples on the film.

This initial stage of 'loitering' with a text is known as 'IMITATION'. It helps to provide all children with the specific structures and patterns and building blocks that they will need in order to create their own version when composing.

### Talk for writing - phase 2 - Innovation

Once the children have heard, spoken, read and explored a model text, internalising it into their long-term working memory, then they are ready for the second phase which is known as 'INNOVATION'. This is when the children are helped to create their own new version of the known text. Young children and those who struggle with composition start by making changes to their maps and then retelling their new version. This has to be modelled by the teacher. A new class map is decided upon and the new story retold. Then the teacher works with different groups, helping children develop their ideas, alter their maps and retell and refine their new versions.

- Draw a new class map, make changes and retell the new version.
- Work with groups so that every child has changed their map.
- Children work in pairs, telling and retelling their new version.

More confident writers might move straight to planning a new version using the 'boxed up' planner. (This involves working out the underlying structure to create a form of flow chart that shows the key sequence of events. I am using an example of this at the 'invention stage' with year 4 on the film). When writing, the class draw on the original text as well as the writing toolkits but also any other examples that have been read carefully, considering the different effects created and what techniques the writer has used. The 'writing toolkits' provide suggestions for innovation.

- Confident writers base their innovations on the 'boxed up' planner. This acts as a paragraph planner for the weaker writer but as a flexible structure for the more confident.
- Use writing toolkits to focus on key features, techniques and writerly ideas.

Shared writing is used to develop the class innovation and is staged over a number of days, with the teacher engaging the children interactively in the writing process. Guided writing is used to support children who share similar strengths. Daily the children write the next section of their emerging text, refining and developing their ideas into prose. The teacher's marking is then used to feedback daily, so that formative assessment is constantly informing and focussing teaching and progress.

- Use shared writing daily, staging the composition section by section.
- Use guided writing daily to provide focussed support for groups with similar needs.
- Use daily feedback so that 'marking' intervenes in the writing, identifying strengths but also places for growth which can then be attended to by the children.

The 'INNOVATION' phase is highly scaffolded so that every child succeeds in writing, gaining in confidence.

### Talk for writing – phase 3 - invention

## Handout PT1.2

The third phase is 'INVENTION'. This is where children are expected to write increasingly independently. The teacher may well decide that certain aspects need revisiting and teaching. There may also be 'feedback' sessions – but the main thrust is on the children writing independently. When writing, less confident children may well rely on the initial model but more confident writers will draw upon many different sources. By this stage, the underlying patterns and structures begin to become 'transferable' so that they can be used in different situations for the young writer's own purposes.

- Decide on any teaching needed.
- Children write more independently, as appropriate.
- Hold feedback and sharing session.
- End with publishing or performing.

### Securing the basics

All of this is underpinned by the importance of securing the basics of handwriting, phonics/spelling and grammar in relation to what is needed for progress and the text type being taught. The approach is also underpinned by the importance of schools increasing the amount children read/are read to and establishing a very strong 'literature spine' which identifies key stories, picture books, poems and non-fiction which will be read and drawn upon and referred to when teaching writing.

### We are still learning

'Talk for writing' is based on deepening our understanding of language development and how writing might best be taught. Of course, there is still much to be learned. 'Talk for Writing' projects involve teachers in researching the processes needed to develop young writers. It is therefore a shifting and dynamic process through which we are forever developing our understanding. It is less effective when reduced to simplistic class routines without teachers thinking carefully about what is happening and adapting their teaching as they learn. Over time a set of core practices has developed (e.g. learning texts orally, shared writing, etc) which would be central to any 'talk for writing' school. However, each school develops the work in different ways, according to their school community, discovering what systems work in their context

### The impact

Many schools have found that daily 'talking the text' has a dramatic influence on progress in composition/writing. For instance, the initial teacher research focussed on children in Reception classes. At the start of the year only 2% of the sample were able to retell a whole story. By the end of the year 76% retold a whole tale. In a study carried out in Lewisham (reported in 'Stories to tell, stories to write') 100% of the primary age pupils tracked made average progress in writing and 80% made 3 or more sublevels progress in one year. By contrast, the same pupils did not make such good progress in reading with 73% making average progress and only 33% making 3 sub levels progress. Interestingly, boys made better progress than girls.

It is worth noting that the teachers involved in this project had attended a one-day conference, followed by support from their local literacy consultants. Complex developments require time, attention and support. The published booklet 'Stories to tell, stories to write' provides useful case studies that illuminate the teachers' and children's journeys as storytellers and writers. It also highlights the value of 'Talk for Writing' for children who have English as new Language as well as those who struggle.

To track progress with the youngest children, it is worth spending time recording. A simple strategy is to ask them, 'can you tell me a story you know' and 'can you make up a new story for me'? It is important to turn these recordings into transcriptions to make later comparisons easier. By the end of the year ask the same pair of questions and compare results. On the original project many children had no clue about stories, some explained that they had no books at home and had not been read stories. A typical response came from one boy:

*Q. Can you tell me a story you now?*

*A. Um, this is the story of ... they went to buy stuff. And that's the end, it's only that.*

*Q. Can you make up a story for me?*

*A. A fishy story um, um. Ummmm, I don't know really.*

Within several weeks of starting 'Talk for Writing' nearly every child can retell a story. At the end of the year, one of the reception children on the original project is asked by the teacher to retell a story. There is a long silence and then he says, '*...the trouble is – I know so many that I don't know which one to tell!*'

A more recent study in Salford by teachers at St Thomas of Canterbury Primary School showed that the approach works very powerfully for children who have English as a new language – indeed, compared with a control group in similar schools, those pupils benefiting from the 'talk for write' approach on average made outstanding progress (reported in 'Learn it, say it, write it!').

### The Writing Repertoire

Over time, children gradually build their bank of well-known texts, supplemented by picture books, novels, poems and non-fiction books. Gradually this living library of language begins to equip the children with the words they need to express themselves. In the same way, the ability to manipulate that bank of texts increasingly enables children to create new versions and become inventive, blending and experimenting.

Constant shared writing also develops writing habits within the class community of writers. Each year, new strategies and techniques are introduced, building on previous learning and giving children confidence as writers. A central concept is the importance of children enjoying writing/creativity, being praised for 'trying hard' so that children's confidence and self-image as a young writer is enhanced. If we all try hard then we will all have every chance of making progress.

The 'Primary Writing Project' focuses on helping teachers deepen their knowledge about how to teach writing effectively and develop the skills needed. The issue is not so much that we do not know how this can be done – for there are examples of effective schools across the country. The challenge is how do we work together in order to establish common practices across schools that are highly effective and deeply satisfying for both teachers and children?

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## T4W teaching sequence

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### PREPARATION

- Children write a 'pre-unit' example – 'cold' writing task.
- **Select, create or adapt an exemplar text** to demonstrate features based on understanding of next steps children need.
- **Teacher learns the text**
- **Create a context:** plan activities, gather resources, design role-play area, choose pictures, animations etc., link to a shared experience e.g. a class visit

### IMITATION

#### Spelling, sentence and paragraph activities:

- related to text or text type,
- what is needed for progress e.g. sentence / spelling games, mini-writes.

#### Tell the story/text

#### Talking and learning the exemplar text:

- establish language patterns – word for word or in own words
- use maps, actions, props, role play to support and remember
- feedback and shaping of retelling for expression and sense

#### Reading the text as a reader:

- read, re-read, discuss and enjoy the written text fluently and with expression, as a shared text – usually from an enlarged version
- comprehension:
  - o identify evidence in the text, which answers questions – literal and inferential, mark up the text
  - o identify key language features built in to the text and discuss their meanings and effects e.g. what difference would it make if they were changed?
- Vocabulary:
  - o check meanings of words and phrases and explore their use investigate alternatives to author's choices etc.
  - o magpie words and expressions –save for future use
- Text structure:
  - o Identify sequence and pattern of text ready for boxing up

#### Reading the text as a writer

- Boxing up, labelling each section of the text in sequence to capture its overall structure
- Then identify key elements of each section in generalisations that can be applied to other content
- Co-construct toolkits focussing on how writers create an effect not a 'level' checklist of tickable 'criteria'.

## Handout PT1.2

- Ensure that working walls or washing lines display maps, texts, word banks, sentence patterns, etc.

### INNOVATION

#### Introduce new stimulus:

- to build content, e.g. develop a story idea; focus on an experience to use as basis for poetry
- or develop knowledge/views for nonfiction
- build in audience and purpose.

#### Using the learned text structure, model drawing a new map

- tell and retell new class version before groups work on own changes.
- box up - complete planner,
- retell.

#### Shared writing

- staged section by section, using model text, writing toolkits, planner or map.
- teacher scribes helping children to suggest words and sentences, choose for effect and bank other good ideas not used in this text
- co-construction of each section not modelling writing for children to watch
- active participation, discussion of choices, paired work and some independent writing to offer suggestions e.g. using mini-whiteboards

#### Guided writing:

- differentiation to support children at varying levels
- teaching to specifics arising from assessment
- varying levels of innovation for more able writers

#### Independent writing:

- De-scaffolding in carefully managed stages e.g. children might complete or change a sentence or a paragraph
- weaker writers 'hug closely', relying on the original,
- stronger writers use boxes and the toolkit.

#### Daily feedback

- marking: teacher and pupil dialogue, using highlighters, etc.
- Whole class discussion on what works.
- Children share work with response partner.
- Immediate improvement of writing in light of discussion.

#### Final reading of texts:

- in 'writing circles' plus evaluation discussion.
- teacher and children decide next steps.
- discuss, demonstrate and set tickable targets.

### INVENTION

**Whole/ group class teaching before independent writing e.g.:**

- reading snippets,
- mini-writes,
- sentence work,
- refine, add to and internalise toolkit,
- vary boxing up,
- comparisons, improve a dull piece;

**Provide new 'starter' as a stimulus:**

- first-hand experience, image, film, drama, objects, challenge with purpose, cross-curricular topic, creative event, etc.

**Draw new map or box up** for planning.

**Possible use of Shared writing** of illustrative exemplar – consolidate understanding of toolkit.

**Possible use of Guided writing** pitched at specific focus for flexible groups.

**Children write independently** – own topic.

**Teacher feedback:**

- 'marking' – teacher and pupil dialogue, using highlighters, etc.
- Whole class discussion on what works.
- Children share work with response partner and read round 'writing circle' for positive comments.
- Immediately improve writing.
- Teacher/children decide next steps, e.g. more work on feedback, further teaching or more independent writing to internalise patterns.
- Further writing lessons focussing on progress + further independent writing.

### EVALUATION

Compare with initial pre-unit writing.

### PUBLICATION

Writing is displayed/ published / performed - illustrated mini books, class blogs, anthologies, scrapbooks, etc.