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7

Teaching Writing Skills

INTRODUCTION

Writing is, by far, the most difficult of the four skills to teach and to learn—indeed, many pupils leave education with only minimal writing skills in their mother tongue (MT). Yet, as we all know, the ability to write is crucial because that is how learners are generally assessed. No matter how much of the Geography syllabus a child knows, if s/he cannot answer the Geography questions in writing, s/he will fail. And when it comes to writing in English, with its different alphabet, the task becomes even more difficult.

There are two basic factors that account for the difficulty in teaching/learning how to write. The first is the nature of writing itself. Writing is a solitary act. Unlike speaking, where we are with people who interact with us and work towards assisting us in making our meaning clear, writing does not have an immediate audience. We do not have the chance to reformulate when we write, as we do when we see that the person we are speaking to does not understand us. When we write, we must communicate perfectly as our audience has no opportunity to question us and clarify anything they may feel they do not comprehend.

The second factor relates to the sad reality of the classroom. It is difficult for teachers to spend the necessary time coaching, guiding and giving adequate feedback to pupils who are learning to write when they are teaching classes of 40, 50, 60 or even more. I have been in many classrooms where it has been simply impossible for the teacher to look over the shoulder of each pupil in her/his class as they practise writing—because of the density of children in the room.

So, when written work is handed in to be corrected, the teacher's heart generally sinks because s/he knows s/he has a long few hours ahead of her/him, working her/his way carefully through all the scripts, identifying mistakes, making suggestions and, finally, somehow coming up with a grade and some encouraging comments. But the pupils' hearts sink too, because they know that what they will probably get back is a piece of writing that they have laboured hard over but which will be covered with red ink

indicating verb mistakes, wrong spellings, unclear meanings, and the like. For (nearly) everyone, the teaching/learning of writing often feels like a lose-lose situation.

At the same time, it is a very empowering moment when a child learns how to write her/his own name, be it in the MT or in a foreign/second language. It is something that parents and guardians, particularly those who happen to be illiterate, find very significant. Unlike speech, which is not considered special because it occurs seemingly naturally and effortlessly, writing is imbued with significance. If something is important, in most societies we want it in writing simply because writing is more permanent than speech. And this is why a written error is treated much more seriously than a spoken error—writing matters.

A main objective of this chapter, therefore, will be to offer some possible ways of building greater success into the teaching/learning of writing skills. But we shall begin by looking at early-stage writing.

Task 1

Do you agree that writing is the most difficult skill to teach?
What is your experience of learning how to write English? Do you feel that you are a competent writer?

EARLY-STAGE WRITING

The first task for the teacher is to ensure that all pupils can hold a pencil properly and that they have the necessary psycho-motor skills to form letters. How these letters are to be formed is a matter of some debate as there are different styles of hand-writing. Suffice it to say that, whichever format is adopted, the teaching should be consistent and should highlight the fact that:

- the general direction is left to right
- the letters sit on the line (although some project above the line and some project below the line).

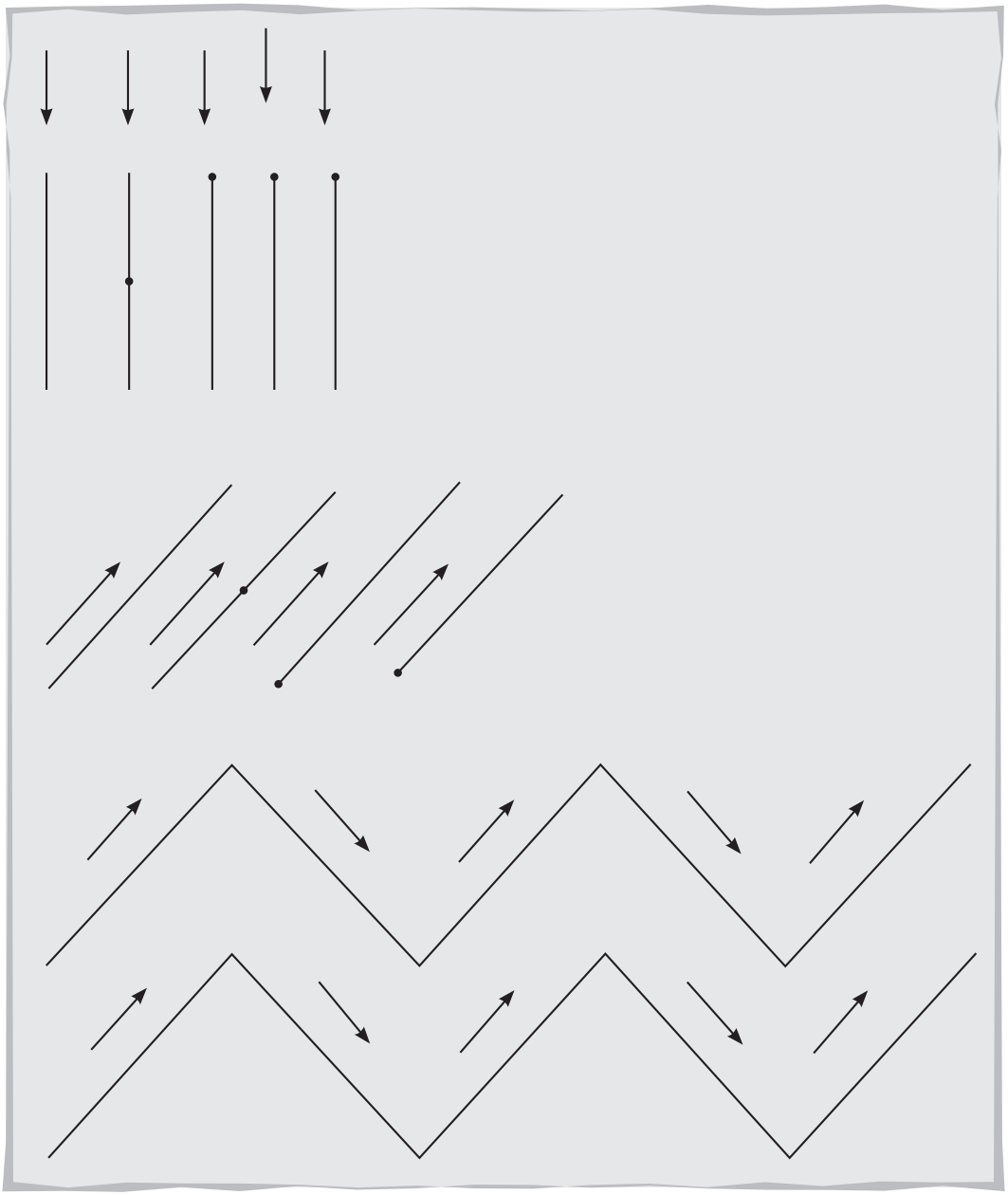
It is now generally agreed that the letters should not be taught in alphabetical order but in clusters according to the basic shape/movement of the letters. (Thus, for example, we might teach b, d, f, h, k, l together. And we might teach g, j, p, q, y together. I hope you can see why!)

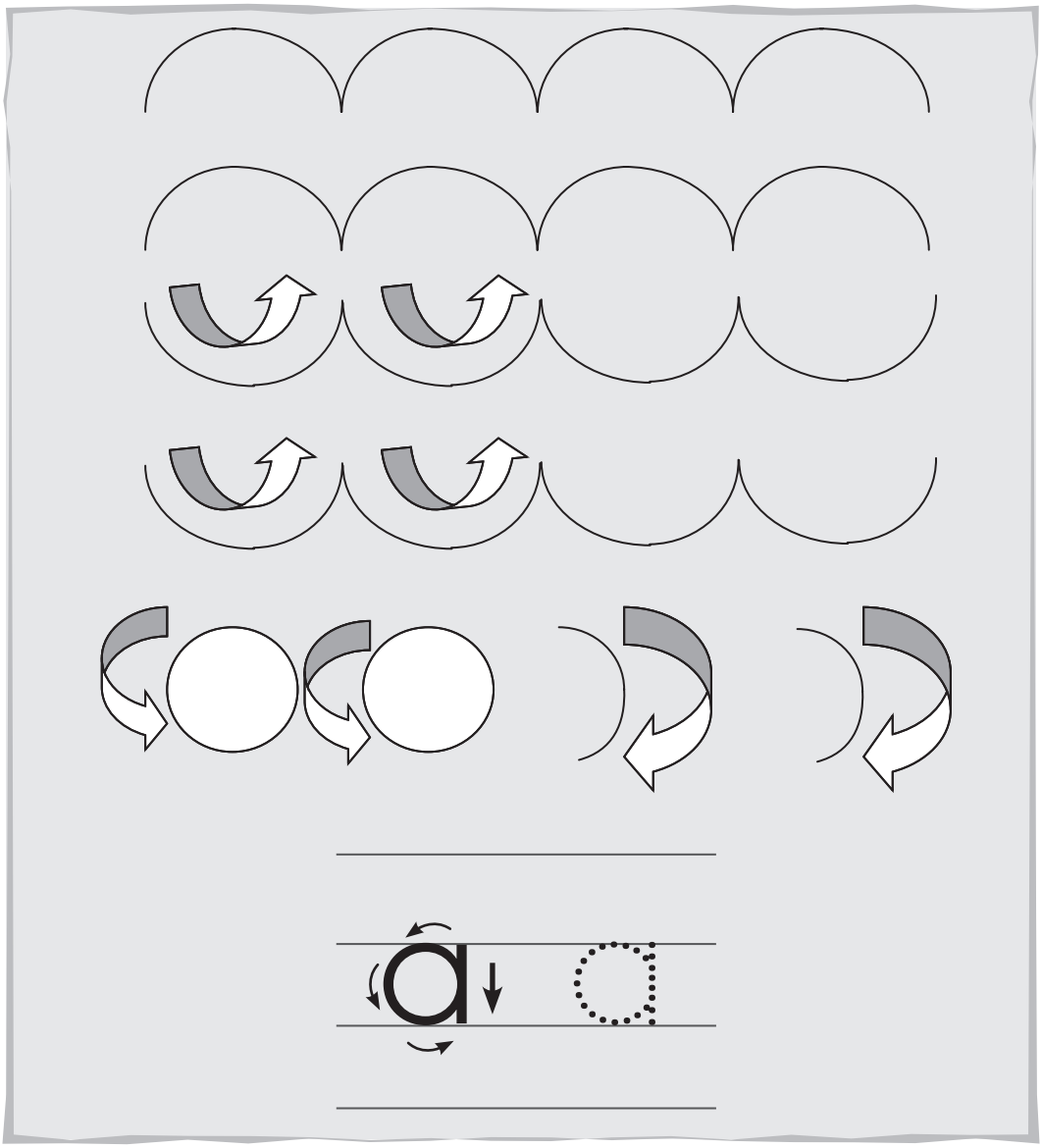
Task 2

Can you identify other clusters of letters which might be taught together?

I referred above to psycho-motor skills. These are the skills which develop hand/eye co-ordination and they need to be practised, beginning first with the basic shapes which underlie all letters—vertical lines, horizontal lines, circles, semi-circles, curves, etc. The board is an essential tool in this process, showing the children **how to form these shapes—where to start, where to finish, etc.**

Here are some examples. The dark lines show what the teacher draws, as an example. The dots show the children where to start. The light lines/dotted lines are what the children have to draw:





There is an established pattern for teaching children how to write the letters of the alphabet.

a. The teacher gives the sound of the letter s/he is going to write—a. (S/He can give some familiar words beginning with the sound—arm/ant/ask, etc.) This is important because giving the sound of the letter (as opposed to its name) links writing to reading, sounding words out and spelling.
b. S/He writes the letter slowly and clearly on the board, using lines as above.
c. As s/he writes, s/he describes what s/he is doing:

Look, we start here and go round. Then we go up and back down again.

d. S/He repeats steps 1–3.
e. S/He then asks the pupils to write the letter in their books.

If the teacher considers it necessary/appropriate, two other possible steps are—getting the pupils to 'draw' the letter in the air before they actually write it and, secondly, asking some of the more confident children to come up and write the letter on the board.

Task 3

Are you able to describe, as above, how to form all the letters of the English alphabet?

The next stage is teaching children how to join letters together. Basically, this is a matter of pointing out where one letter ends and the other begins. The combination —'wh-' is a good one to start with because it is so common.

The letter 'w' is written on the board and, close beside it, the letter 'h'. The teacher then follows the same procedure as above—writing the letter 'w' while describing what s/he is doing and then saying '*. . . now, at the top of the 'w' we go across and up to the top of the 'h' and back down again and . . .*'.

What this teaching procedure offers is the maximum scaffolding—the pupils can **see** the teacher writing the letters and, at the same time, they can **hear** the teacher's description. (If the teacher chooses to ask the pupils to 'write' the letters in the air with their fingers, then they are **practising the movements** as well.)

The letters in English are joined in one of four ways:

a. diagonally, to letters without ascenders (e.g., an, am, as, in, is, un, ur)
b. diagonally, to letters with ascenders (e.g., at, sh, sl, sk, ch, eb)
c. horizontally, to letters without ascenders (e.g., on, ox, wa, fa, vo)
d. horizontally, to letters with ascenders (e.g., wh, rt, rl, ok, ot)

There are also letters known as break letters which, in some formats, do not join with other letters (e.g., go, xe, ba, ju, pa, bu, pi, ze).

The key to learning handwriting is a clear description, plus example from the teacher using the board, plus lots and lots of practice with feedback from the teacher. And do remember—young children are still developing their hand-eye co-ordination so don't expect too much too soon. What they need is practice and support.

SPELLING

If children only began to write when they could spell properly, children would never learn to write at all. As teachers, we have to accept that the ability to spell develops as our pupils are exposed to more language and as they begin to write. We saw in Chapter 1 how grammatical accuracy grows out of oral fluency. Children hear language (which

parents and others simplify for them) in contexts which they understand and they are encouraged to speak, their mistakes being reformulated rather than corrected. Over time, their spoken language approximates more and more closely to that of the people around them.

In a sense, spelling develops in similar fashion. Children develop correct spelling through sufficient exposure to the written word (i.e., through reading—seeing correctly spelled words in contexts which they understand) and through being encouraged to write, their mistakes being reformulated rather than corrected, particularly at the beginning. Over time, their written language approximates more and more closely to that of the texts around them.

This insight provides us with a methodology for teaching spelling. First, when children have read a text, we can ask them to notice how particular words are spelled. Second, when we respond to what they have written we have to do so in such a way as to encourage rather than discourage. Simply identifying every mistake is not a constructive way to encourage learning. We can begin our feedback by always identifying aspects of the written work which are praiseworthy—rather than say that the pupil has misspelled six words, we can say instead that he has spelled eight difficult words correctly. (We must, of course, also identify what the pupil has got wrong but that should never be the main focus of our feedback.) Teachers should note the most commonly misspelled words and devise ways of focusing their pupils' attention on these words. There are various techniques for doing this. Here are five:

a. We can offer various forms of a word and pupils have to choose the correct form:

   i. thire ii. thier iii. their / i. thogh ii. thuogh iii. though

b. We can offer a sentence or a text with mistakes.

There is one spelling mistake in each line. Find each mistake and correct it.

Once upon a time, there was a tortiose. He was a very, very slow animal and some other animals lauhged at him. The hare was the fastest of all the animals. He laughed at the tortoise becaus he was so slow.

One day, the tortoise siad to the hare, 'You are very fast, Hare, but if we race, I will win'. The hare laughed and agrede to the race.

c. We can identify 10 commonly misspelled words. We say each word and get the pupils to spell it correctly (by asking the class rather than individuals). We write each word on the board. Then we erase each word, one at a time, asking pupils to spell the word which has just been erased. Then we say each word again and the pupils write them down, as in a dictation. They then exchange with their partners, so that they check each other's work.

d. We can write a word on the board, e.g., flight. We can then ask pupils (working in pairs or small groups) to write down five words that rhyme with 'flight'—night, white, fright, kite, right, etc. We then elicit these words from the class, putting them into groups according to their spelling—flight, night, right, fright, white, kite.

Task 4

Can you add three more words to each category?

e. We can write common letter combinations on the board—e.g., wh—and ask pupils (again working in pairs or small groups) to write down five words beginning with that combination. Or, similarly, write -tion and ask them to provide five words ending in this way.

Case study

Imagine a learner producing the following piece of writing:

The train came into the stashin.

The learner has tried to communicate in writing and has succeeded, because we understand this completely, despite the misspelling. Not only that, the learner has 'followed' the sound of the word. All this learner needs is the awareness that there are other ways of spelling the sound /shin/:

-sion (mission / session)
-tion (station / action)

and practice (via the above techniques) in reproducing the correct spelling.

Task 5

Which common English words are most frequently misspelled, in your experience?

To round off this section, I offer below a spelling 'syllabus'—basically, a list of key words that pupils should learn how to read, write and spell, year by year. It is important, however, to preface this with two important caveats. First, there will be disagreement over some of the actual words chosen. However, if we agree that pupils need to know a certain number of common words, then it is easy enough to add other words (while remembering to remove some also!) to suit specific learning situations. Second, such a list does not mean that these should be the only words presented to the pupils. Far from it! The pupils should be exposed to a great deal of English but we cannot expect them to learn every bit of language that they encounter. Such a list allows teachers and material writers to focus their efforts.

A Spelling 'syllabus'.

P1 > 12 words > a and he I in is it of that the to was
P 2 > the above 12 words plus 28

all are as at be but can came for had have him his my new no not on one said she so they two we when with you

P3 > the above 40 words plus 60

about an back because been before big by call come could did do down first from get go going has her here if into like little look made make me more much must now off old only or our other out over right see some their them there then this up want well went were what where which who will

P4 > From the 100 words above, teachers should revise the following 60

about an back because been before big by call come could did do down first from get go going has her here if into like little look made make me more much must now off old only or our other out over right see some their them there then this up want well went were what where which who will

plus 90 words

after again always am ask another any away baby ball best black blue book boy bring children day dinner don't door each egg end every farm fast fell find five fly four found girl gave give good green hand head help home house how jump just keep know last left live long many never next once open own play put read room round saw say school should soon stop take tell than these thing think three time too tree under very walk white why wish work woman would year your

P5 > the above 150 words plus 120

above aeroplane afternoon allow although along any April arm arrive August autumn aunt balloon breakfast beach behind below brother brown centre circle city coming computer cousin December doctor door eight eleven evening father February fifteen fifty floor forty Friday friend front grandfather grandmother grey huge hundred holiday India January July June kitchen knee later leave leg lie March May Monday million morning Mr Mrs Miss money name near night nine ninety nothing November October often orange phone picture place playground purple rectangle rice road Saturday September seven shoe sister small square street Sunday talk teacher team telephone television Thursday thousand time town today triangle Tuesday twelve twenty thirteen thirty tomorrow uncle under walk watch Wednesday white would world yellow yesterday

This means that, by the end of P5, pupils should have been taught how to read, write and spell 310 high-frequency words.

Task 6

Are there words in the above list that you think should not be included? Which words would you replace them with?

(There is more about spelling in the chapter on 'Learning How to Learn')

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS

When pupils first begin to learn how to write, they should not be asked to compose sentences. Instead they should be given practice in copying words and very simple sentences which have been contextualised. For example, the teacher draws a cat on the board and the pupils copy it. Then, under the drawing, the teacher writes *cat.* The pupils then copy the word *cat.* So now, in their copybooks, they have a drawing of a cat and, under it, the label, *cat*—a word in a context. As their writing develops, they could be asked to copy a simple sentence such as *This is a cat.*

But, at this stage, we must be very careful. We saw in the first chapter that asking pupils to read a dialogue aloud is not asking them to engage in oral communication 'because each one already knows what the other is going to say. And, equally importantly, when pupils are reading a dialogue aloud, they may not necessarily understand what they are reading'. So too with writing. Asking them to copy is not asking them to engage in written communication. And they may not understand what they are copying. At the same time, however, we know that pupils cannot be expected to create written texts at the beginning of their writing course—copying is the only answer! So here we have a dilemma which many English teachers face on a daily basis.

Task 7

Do you understand clearly why asking pupils to copy a piece of writing is not asking them to engage in written communication?

The solution to this problem is to introduce an element of thinking, of cognitive processing. Once they know how to write 'This is a . . .' and once they know the names of some animals—cow, dog, cat, horse, snake, camel, for example—we can—

a. ask them to match sentences (This is a camel. / This is a cat. / etc.) to the appropriate pictures
b. provide them with 'This is a . . .' and ask them to write the appropriate sentence under each picture, adding the name of each animal

c. give them the pictures of animals and ask them to write a sentence saying what each animal is

Notice that the demands on the pupils increase from not doing any writing in a. to composing a sentence in c. Notice, also, that in all three, the writing experience is scaffolded for the pupils. This simple sequence provides us with a methodology for teaching writing, up to paragraph level.

Task 8

Identify all the scaffolding elements in a., b. and c. above.

I wrote above that it was important to introduce an element of cognitive processing, but why might this be the case? The process of composition involves (in the case above) a number of cognitive operations—the pupil needs to

a. identify the picture of the animal
b. be able to write, spell and punctuate the sentence base 'This is a . . .'.
c. be able to write and spell the name of the animal correctly and put it in the correct position (i.e., NOT 'This cat is a'. BUT 'This is a cat').

It is clear that copying sentences is not a sufficient preparation for composing sentences because, in copying, none of these cognitive operations is required. Once we have identified the cognitive work that the pupil needs to do, we are in a position to provide practice in these areas and, at the same time, provide scaffolding to help the pupil learn how to produce the target sentences.

(There is further discussion of the role of copying in the teaching of writing in the chapter on 'Learning How to Learn'.)

The next section presents a variety of writing activities based on this principle.

DISCUSSION

Task 1

I cannot comment on Task 1, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague.

Task 2

These groupings depend, of course, on the style of hand-writing taught.
a c d e g o q—these all go round anti-clockwise

b h k l p—these all have a long down-stroke
i m n r—these all have a short down-stroke
u y—similar shape
v w—similar shape
t f—in-between size
j s x z—odd

Task 3

I cannot comment on Task 3, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague.

Task 4

I cannot comment on Task 4, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague. Here are some—

fight, height, light, might, plight, sight, tight
bite, quite, rite, spite

Task 5

I cannot comment on Task 5, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague. It might be of interest to see a list of the words that native English-speaking pupils commonly misspell. (By the way, it is recommended that, by Primary 6 and 7, pupils are able to spell these words.)

their / your / because / something / swimming / let's / woman / said / cousin / interesting / until / running / went / here / now / its / again / for / surprise / school / to / clothes / thought / named / first / mother / animals / wanted / alright / sometimes / our / believe / where / many / decided / bought / heard / February / before / jumped / there / looked / and / came / were / another / started / bear / happened / friends / asked / little / stopped / know / friend / getting / received / once / caught / around / they / people / beautiful / name / than / through / that's / from / didn't / children / off / things / very / with / money / going / coming / like / every / dropped / then / pretty / it's / tried / two / some / would / frightened / always / an / through / him / morning / together / when / course / too / they're / different / babies

Task 6

I cannot comment on Task 6, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague.

Task 7

I cannot comment fully on Task 7, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague. One way of demonstrating this is to ask you to copy the following—

a. Il pleut. b. Nach b'e am balach e!

Now I am quite sure you can copy these accurately but I am equally sure that no reader of this book understands both sentences! And, if you don't understand, you cannot possibly be communicating.

(By the way, the first sentence is French (It's raining.) while the second sentence is Gaelic, one of the indigenous languages of Scotland (What a heroic, noble fellow!).

Task 8

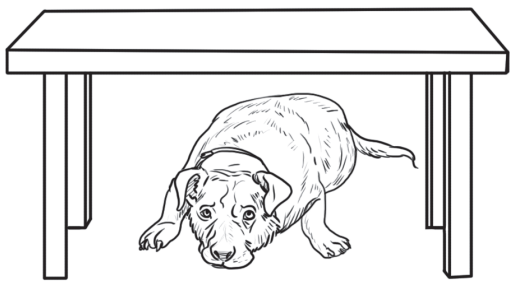
In a. the pupils are given both the sentence and the visual (both elements of scaffolding) and their task is to match the two.

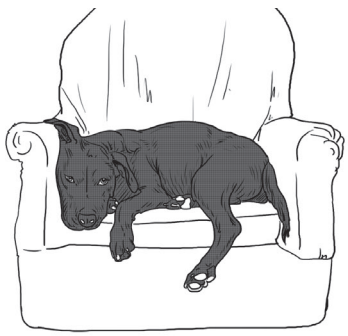
In b. they are given the base of the sentence ('This is a . . .'), which is scaffolding and the visual (more scaffolding) and their task is to identify the name of the animal in the visual, copy the sentence base and write the appropriate word (cat, camel, etc.).

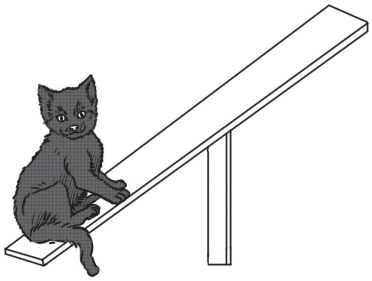
In c. the only bit of scaffolding provided is the visual. They have to identify the name of the animal in the visual and write the appropriate sentence (This is a cat / This is a camel / etc.).

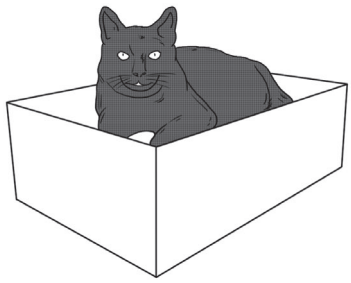
Writing Activities

a. *Look at the pictures and write seven true sentences using the following table. One has been done for you.*









			sleeping.
			sitting on a seesaw.
	fat white cat		sitting in a chair.
The		is	reading a book.
	thin black dog		lying under a table.
			riding a bicycle.
			hiding behind a tree.
			lying in a box.

Example: The fat white cat is hiding behind a tree.

(Note: This is basically a matching activity but it involves more work from the learners in that they have to distinguish between white and black, fat and thin and cat and dog.)

b. Here is a similar type of activity, this time focusing on definitions.

Write nine true sentences using the table below. One has been done for you.

i) A postman is a		a) lives in the sea.
ii) A camel is an	person who	b) lives in the water.
iii) A penguin is a	reptile that	c) lives in hot, dry places.
iv) A crocodile is a	bird that	d) cannot fly.
v) A doctor is a	animal that	e) delivers letters.
vi) A whale is an		f) teaches children.
vii) A teacher is a		g) gives people medicine.
viii) A mason is a		h) makes clothes.
ix) A cow is an		i) builds with stone.
x) A tailor is a		j) gives us milk.

Example: A postman is a person who delivers letters.

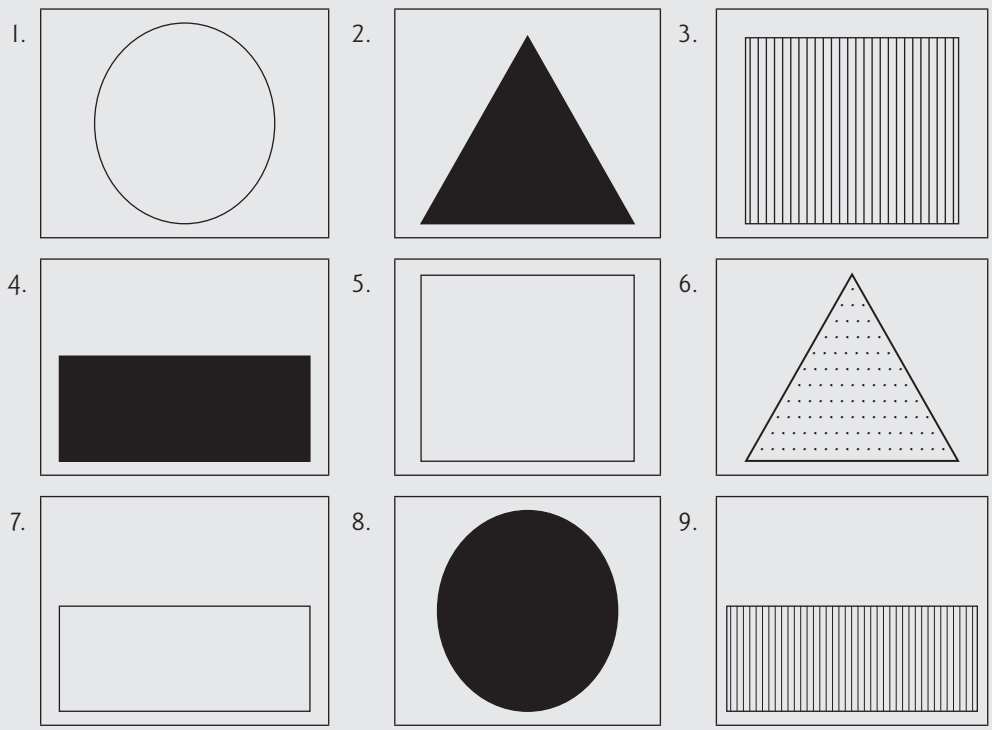
Note: Again in this activity, the learners do not have to compose any language. But they have to do more than simply copy. They have to do some cognitive work to match the name (e.g., crocodile) with the group to which they belong (reptile) and with the defining information (lives in the water).

Task 9

Can you see a drawback with activity b.?

c. Imagine a group of learners who have just learnt the names of the four basic shapes—square, rectangle, circle and triangle. They know the names of the colours and patterns from previous learning. Here is a writing activity for them:

Look at the picture below. Write a sentence, saying what is in each box. The first one has been done for you.



Example: In box 1, there is a white circle.

Note: The work the learners have to do here involves:

- identifying numbers 1–9
- identifying the names of 2 colours and 2 patterns

- identifying the names of 4 shapes
- copying the base pattern—In box . . . , there is a . . .
- inserting the appropriate number, colour, pattern and shape into each sentence.

Unlike the previous activity, here the learners have to compose sentences but a model is provided.

d. Here is a slightly different variety of the same technique, suitable for the beginner stage. The teacher presents the following table on the board:

   i. My name is _____.
   ii. I am a _____. (girl / boy)
   iii. I am _____. (six / seven / eight)
   iv. I _____ cricket / climbing trees / swimming. (like / don't like)

   (The areas of choice—girl/boy, six/seven/eight, like/don't like—could be written in different coloured chalk. This will remind the pupils that these are not simply copied but they have to choose the appropriate one. The activities could, of course, be adapted to suit the profile of the class.)
   The pupils are required to **copy, select** and **complete** each sentence (by copying the appropriate choice).

Task 10

Identify the advantages of such an activity.

The above activity could be extended as follows:

e. Look at the table below:

A	B	C
My name	is	_____.
I	am	seven / eight / nine / ten.
My father's name	is	_____.
He	is	a policeman / a farmer / a shopkeeper.*
My mother's name	is	_____.
I	have	no / one / two / three brother(s).
{His name	is	_____.}
{Their names	are	_____.}
I	have	no / one / two / three sister(s).
{Her name	is	_____.}
{Their names	are	_____.}

*A list of professions can also be elicited. I have omitted reference to the mother's profession out of cultural sensitivity but, of course, teachers would be in the best position to judge whether such a sentence should be included.

There are two important points to make about the above table:

1. The information on this table can be elicited from the pupils themselves in the classroom. The teacher can ask different pupils the names of various family members and draw the above table on the board. This will make the whole exercise much more relevant and interesting because the information on the board will have come from the pupils themselves.
2. The sentences are not random. Again, you will see that they form a short composition—My Family.

It is important in the teaching of writing that teachers move as rapidly as possible to the stage where their pupils are writing not isolated, decontextualised sentences but short paragraphs.

f. One way of doing this is to use the reading passage in the textbook, particularly if that text happens to be a story. Imagine that the class has read the story *The Enormous Turnip*, which we looked at in the previous chapter.

Here is the beginning of The Enormous Turnip. *There are nine sentences but they have been mixed up. Choose the appropriate ending for each sentence to tell the story. The first one has been done for you. When you have finished, copy out the story.*

a) The farmer and his wife were very happy	i) but they couldn't pull up the turnip.
b) One day the farmer's wife	ii) but they couldn't pull up the turnip.
c) She pulled and pulled	iii) because they had food to eat.
d) She went to get	iv) the cow.
e) She pulled the turnip and her husband pulled her	v) but she couldn't pull up the turnip.
f) She went to get	vi) went to get a turnip for dinner.
g) She pulled the turnip and her husband pulled her and the horse pulled her husband	vii) but they couldn't pull up the turnip.
h) She went to get	viii) her husband.
i) She pulled the turnip and her husband pulled her and the horse pulled her husband	ix) the horse and the cow pulled the horse

Example: a) – iii)

Task 11

Complete the above activity.

Alternatively, we could provide the sentence endings in a list and ask the pupils to select and copy the appropriate ending for each sentence:

i. The farmer and his wife were very happy _____.
ii. One day the farmer's wife _____.

(And so on.)

The cognitive work which a learner has to do in order to complete this activity is considerably more than in previous activities. The main difference is the importance of the **discourse markers** 'because' and 'but' and the narrative sequence—first the wife; then the wife and her husband; then the wife, husband and horse; then the wife, husband, horse and cow. These pieces of information are provided in the sentences following, which forces the learner to read on in the activity to find the answer.

g. We can also use this technique with texts which are not narratives. Imagine that the class has read a text about snakes.

Sample Classroom Task

Here is a paragraph of seven sentences about snakes. But the sentences have been mixed up. Put them in order and then write out the paragraph. The first one has been done for you.

i. A second way is for the snake to bite and then poison its prey.
ii. These snakes are the harmless ones.
iii. A large snake sometimes coils its body around its prey and squeezes it to death.
iv. It is from these poisonous snakes that we get snake venom for medicine.
v. Snakes have three ways of getting food.
vi. A third way is for the snake to bite its prey.
vii. Then it finds a quiet place to stay and digest its dinner.

i. Snakes have three ways of getting food.

Again, pupils have to do quite a lot of cognitive work. They have to identify the links between 'poison its prey' (i) and 'these poisonous snakes' (iv) and, possibly more difficult, the links between 'bite its prey' (vi) and 'the harmless ones' (ii), where biting has to be seen as harmless (in comparison with poison and squeezing to death).

And they have to identify the discourse markers* 'A second way' and 'A third way' and the use of 'these' to refer to things previously mentioned.

Here is another variant of the 'snake' activity.

Put the sentences a. to e. in the spaces provided to make a complete text. The first one has been done for you.

1. There are three types of snakes.
   e) The first kills by biting a small animal or insect.

*Discourse markers: a term in linguistics which suggests how context or code in speech is identified by people who listen to the piece of communication.

3. The second type uses poison.
   .....
5. Sometimes, like the spitting cobra, they don't have to catch their prey to poison it.
   .....
7. Then they can catch it easily.
   .....
9. They don't chew with their teeth.
   .....
11. Then they find a place to stay where they can digest their dinner.

a. *The third type first catches its prey and then squeezes it to death.*
b. *They swallow the whole animal.*
c. *Usually these snakes first bite their prey and then they poison it.*
d. *They spit the poison at the eyes of the prey and blind it.*
e. *The first kills by biting a small animal or insect.*

Task 12

Complete the above activity.

So far, we have been focusing on practising the cognitive operations which are involved in writing. And a point that has been repeated several times is the need for the careful scaffolding of the writing experience so that learners gain in confidence. Scaffolding is of central importance in supporting learners as they try to **activate** (i.e., use) the language and skills which they already have.

It is also worth remembering that the productive skills (speaking and writing) always lag behind the receptive skills (listening and reading), basically because speaking and writing involve the learner in more processing. (And, as we saw earlier, speaking is easier than writing because, unlike writing, speaking is collaborative—our audience is with us and can ask for clarification, if necessary.) We must be careful, therefore, when planning a writing programme that the pupils are always working **within their competence**. If we present learners with writing tasks that are beyond their competence (or, beyond the competence of all but a few very smart kids) then we are condemning them, and ourselves, to the lose-lose scenario described in the introduction to this chapter. We must always remember, and this is particularly true in the case of learning how to write, that success breeds success.

There are two more activity types which we should look at, which develop the writing skill further.

Information transfer

Read the paragraph below and complete the table.

The Bengal Tiger

The Bengal tiger may be twelve feet long and may weigh 250 kilos. They have orange-brown fur, with black stripes. They hunt alone, at night. They locate their prey by smell.

Bengal Tiger
1. Length: _____
2. Weight: _____
3. Colour : _____
4. Hunt: _____ / _____
5. Locate prey: _____

Now look at this table:

African Lion.
1. Length: ten feet
2. Weight: 250 kilos
3. Colour: yellow-brown
4. Hunt: in groups/during the day
5. Locate prey: by sight

Now write a paragraph on the African lion.

The idea behind information transfer is simple:

- we offer a paragraph describing something
- we isolate the particular characteristics of this description
- we transfer these to a table
- we offer a similar table
- we ask learners to produce a similar paragraph.

Here is another.

Rezia is nine years old. She has two sisters and one brother. Her favourite subject at school is History. She has two hobbies. After school, she loves working in the garden with her grandfather. She also likes swimming. Her favourite food is chicken. She doesn't like fish. When she's older, she wants to be a doctor.

Name – Rezia
Age – 9
Family – 2 sisters/1 brother
Favourite school subject – History
Hobbies – gardening/swimming
Favourite food – chicken
Doesn't like – fish
Wants to be – doctor

Name – Arindam
Age – 10
Family – 1 sister/3 brothers
Favourite school subject – English
Hobbies – cricket / watching TV
Favourite food – vegetables
Doesn't like – meat
Wants to be – software engineer

Now write a paragraph about Arindam.

One common approach is to treat the 'model' paragraph like a reading comprehension. The teacher asks the questions and writes the answers (Name : Rezia; Age : 9; etc.) on the board. The teacher can then write a corresponding set of details (Arindam's – as above) and ask the class to write a paragraph describing Arindam.

To provide some grammatical scaffolding, the teacher would point out that Rezia is a girl ('she') but Arindam is a boy, so ....? (the answer being the pronoun-*he*)

These information-transfer activities provide highly-structured support for learners learning how to write. They are also very adaptable. Teachers could organise pupils to write about each other and, with the necessary grammatical changes (and scaffolding!), learners could easily write about themselves.

The adaptability does not end there, however. For example, the teacher could provide the narrative account of a journey, identifying mode of transport; destination; preparation for journey; purpose of journey; duration of journey; events that occurred; interesting people encountered; sights seen; emotions felt; among others. These could then be replaced (as above) and the pupils asked to write the second narrative.

What we have here is a methodology for genre-based approaches to writing. Essentially, a genre-based approach identifies different 'types' of writing—narrative; description—of people, of events, of processes, etc.; various types of letters—business letters, letters of complaint, personal letters, etc. It should be clear how information-transfer can provide a straightforward, simple methodology for teaching the various genres required by school syllabi.

Task 13

Try to devise an information transfer activity of your own.

Mind maps

As has been said several times throughout this book, the board is one of the language teacher's most valuable resources. It is the natural place for the teacher to write vocabulary which has been elicited from the class or to write a grammatical structure that the teacher is going to teach. It can also be used to demonstrate how the pupils should organise their copybooks—as regards margins, lines, forming letters, spacing of words, etc. It can also be used to show information that has been elicited from pupils in the course of oral composition. The pupils can then use what is on the board when they are asked to produce a written version. This is, essentially, what a mind-map is.

Step 1 – the teacher divides the class into pairs/small groups
Step 2 – the teacher asks questions and elicits answers from the pupils
Step 3 – the teacher writes the (most appropriate) answers on the board **in an organised way**, i.e. not simply at random

So, if the teacher wants the pupils to write a composition about themselves, we might end up with something like this –

name –
age –
description – tall?/short?
– hair – long?/short?
– clothes – blouse/shirt/trousers/skirt/etc.
– likes? / dislikes?

ME

My Family
– mother?
– father + job?
– brother(s) + age(s)?
– sister(s) + age(s)?

My House
– where?
– how big?
– rooms?
– pet(s)?
– name(s)

REMEMBER

I am ....
He is.....She is.../They are...
It is.../It has....
My friend = he/she
= is/has/wears/likes/etc.
There is..../There are....

Notice the amount of work that has to be done before the pupils even pick up their pens! The board is where the composition is planned. All the language should come from the pupils. The teacher's task is to ask the right questions to generate the content of the composition and to arrange that content appropriately on the board. The teacher should also highlight areas of language that will be of use to the pupils. The scaffolding consists of –

Content – generated by pupils with the help of the teacher;
Format – organised by the teacher on the board (possibly with the help of the pupils);
Language to be aware of—identified by the teacher.
Only when this work has been done are the pupils ready to write.

This is how we **teach** writing, by 'scaffolding' (or supporting) the pupils in their writing task. If we just ask them to write a paragraph or a composition, we are not teaching, we are testing!

WRITING AS PRODUCT/WRITING AS PROCESS

There are two ways of looking at writing: we can look at the end-result, the finished article—in which case we are looking at writing as product. And this is the approach that has been outlined above.

We can also look at **how** that final product came to be written—in which case we are looking at writing as process. A great deal of research has been conducted into what makes a good writer. Do they start with a plan or does the composition grow organically? Do they review their work continually or do they conduct a final review when they have finished? When do they check for mistakes?

Notice that all these questions focus on the 'how' of writing—they are all process-based. We know certain characteristics that good writers seem to share:

a. they know what they wish to say and they know whom they are writing for
b. they compose in sections
c. they are constantly re-reading and re-writing (parts of) sections in the light of other sections—they review in a rather fluid manner
d. they spend a lot of time reviewing what they have written.

Now, there are ways of promoting these habits in the classroom but they all require a great deal of time and effort on the part of the teachers concerned. It is not simply a matter of correcting the pupil's work and giving it back. We have to encourage them to re-write what they have written in the light of our comments and that is not something that most learners enjoy, initially, at least. But it is possible to instill the habit of re-writing

When it does happen, however, it can be spectacularly successful. I once had a class of 20 trainee English teachers and I conducted such an experiment with them. I asked them to write two hundred words about themselves. I then corrected what they had written but wrote down other questions (e.g., What does your older brother do? When did he leave home? How often do you see him? Do you miss him being at home? Tell me more about your grandmother's illness. And so on.) which they then answered.

And I responded with corrections and even more questions. My purpose was to get them to accept that writing to the teacher was an ordinary part of studying English. I became their audience. They began to write down questions that they wanted me to answer. And, all the time, their writing skills improved.

(Writing as process will be discussed in more depth in the chapter on Learning How to Learn.)

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have focused our attention on how we might get our pupils to produce paragraphs of accurate, well-structured English. The key points to note are that we should not ask our learners to write before they are ready; that we must scaffold their efforts and that we must constantly encourage them.

DISCUSSION

Task 9

I cannot comment fully on Task 9, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague. The obvious drawback for me is the fact that the 'animal' category forces the use of 'an' while the other three categories do not. So a learner who notices the use of 'an' could guess that camel, whale and cow all belong to the same category even if they didn't know these names.

We could remedy this by using the word 'creature' rather than animal, but 'creature' is a less common word.

Task 10

I cannot comment fully on Task 10, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague. It seems to me that the advantages of such an activity are:

a. all the language (apart from the name) is given to the learner—they do not have to create/compose language.
b. the sentences are not random—designed simply to practise writing. Instead, they are contextualised to form a meaningful paragraph.
c. the learners are involved in writing true sentences about themselves.
d. the element of choice (girl/boy, etc.) is important in that it forces the child to consider meaning. They are not **only** copying; they are doing important cognitive work.

Task 11

a) – iii); b) – vi); c) – v); d) – viii); e) – i/ii/vii); f) – ix); g) – i/ii/vii); h) – iv); i) – i/ii/vii)

Task 12

1. e) 3. c) 5. d) 7. a) 9. b)

Task 13

I cannot comment on Task 13, although I recommend that you discuss your responses with a colleague.