

Written expression remediation for primary students

Written expression is one of the most challenging tasks for children to learn. Students who experience difficulties in acquiring fluent and efficient writing skills may struggle to generate ideas, construct meaningful sentences, sequence and organise their ideas into paragraphs, and use grammar appropriately. These students may also have difficulty with handwriting, punctuation and spelling. Furthermore, writing requires knowledge of text genres, text cohesion and coherence, and a sense of audience. Any weaknesses in oral language expression are likely to transfer to written work as it is very rare for someone to be able to write material they are unable to say.

To learn all the skills necessary for written expression, a highly structured, explicit, systematic teaching approach is needed with many opportunities for students to practise and apply learned skills. Students must be taught to identify the features and structures of texts when reading and work towards transferring their spoken language into written work. Providing students with the structure and strategies for building suitable sentences and paragraphs, and the composition of simple texts, will give them the foundation skills necessary to write effectively in the upper primary and secondary years.

TALKING AND READING FOR WRITING

“Unsurprisingly, the best writers in any class are always readers. Reading influences writing- the richness, depth and breadth of reading determines the writer that we become.” Pie Corbett, *Talk For Writing*.

As children read and are read to, they store patterns that form the building blocks of written expression. In order to write sentence patterns appropriate to a given text (e.g. a recount starts with ‘when, who, what and where’ elements) children need to have these patterns modelled with multiple opportunities to say them before being expected to write them.

In *Talk For Writing*, the process of “Imitation – Innovation – Invention” is explored. Students learn to orally recite and act out popular stories through listening and reading. The teacher maps out the story using pictures to aid students’ memory. The repetition allows the students to interact with the text and helps them to internalise the language patterns and text features. Students are then taught to use the underlying structure of the original text to create their own version on a different topic. Over time, they move towards independent writing as they create texts about their own topics.

SENTENCE-LEVEL ACTIVITIES

Students need to be taught to write simple, grammatically correct sentences before learning to write compound and complex sentences. Sentence-level activities should also teach basic editing skills.

Grammar:

Grammar must be taught in the context of combining words and building sentences, not just analysing parts of speech in isolation. Words themselves have no value until they are combined. Word banks can be a useful tool to support the generation and organisation of ideas however students also need to be taught the function of the words and *how* to use them in their writing.

- Teach students to identify and use the 8 parts of speech in spoken and written sentences: nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections.
- Target particular parts of speech to demonstrate their function.

- **Word Chaining:** Start with a noun and ask students to generate an adjective that can describe it. Then think of another noun that can be described by the same adjective, and so on (e.g. frog – green – apple – round – ball...)
- **Pronoun swap:** Ask students to identify the noun in a sentence and change it to a pronoun. For example, *Jane skipped* becomes *She skipped*.
- **Tense swap:** Use a passage from a familiar book and ask students to identify the verbs. Then, help them to change the tense from past to present, present to past or into the future tense. Start with short sentences and build up to longer pieces of text. For example, in the book *Wombat Stew* by Marcia K. Vaughan the sentence '*Platypus came ambling up the bank*' (past tense) becomes *Platypus ambles up the bank* (present tense) or *Platypus will amble up the bank* (future tense). Explore the impact of change in tense on the spelling of the verbs (e.g. -ed, -ing, -es suffixes).

Teach students how parts of speech are combined to create simple or more elaborate sentences. For example:

The		cat		climbed.
<i>article</i>		<i>noun</i>		<i>verb</i>
The	black	cat	quickly	climbed.
<i>article</i>	<i>adjective (to describe the noun)</i>	<i>noun</i>	<i>adverb (to describe the verb)</i>	<i>verb</i>

If students have difficulty varying their sentences, collect different common patterns, e.g.:

- Vary sentence openings: 'when' starter- Last week...; 'where' starter- On top of the hill...; 'name' starter- Mary watched...
- Vary sentence length: short simple sentences for drama and clarity- Max ran.; compound sentences for flow- Max ran and Sally walked.; descriptive sentences- Max carried an old map and a bright torch, complex sentences for layers of information- As Max ran, Sally quickly marched up the steep hill.
- Vary sentence type: questions to draw in the reader- Did you hear that?; exclamations for impact- Run for it!

Building Sentences:

- To build students' understanding of what a 'sentence' is, provide examples and non-examples. Read groups of words which are either a complete thought (a sentence) or an incomplete thought (a fragment) and discuss which one is a sentence and why.
- Use 'people puzzles' to explore sentences and fragments. Choose 4 – 6 children to each hold up a single word written on a card. They then try to make a complete sentence using the words they have.
- Scrambled Sentences: Re-arrange groups of words into sentences and add in the correct punctuation. Keep the sentences short at first and provide the first word capitalised for support if needed.
- Teach students how punctuation can determine the function of a sentence. Introduce one sentence type (statements, commands, questions and exclamations): at a time (e.g. *What time is it?*), working up to applying different kinds of punctuation within one sentence (e.g. *"I hate brussel sprouts!"*, *yelled John.*).

Building Longer Sentences:

Introduce some of the 'wh-' question words (*when, where* and *why*) and give students small phrases such as *wombat sleep* or *swimming carnival*. Students use the questions words to expand the sentence and generate answers in complete sentences:

Where did the wombat sleep? Where is the swimming carnival?

When did the wombat sleep? When is the swimming carnival?

Why did the wombat sleep? Why do we have a swimming carnival?

- Once students are confident with this skill introduce the other question words (*who, what, why* and *how*). This activity is also useful in developing reading comprehension skills.

- Provide students with sentences to be combined into one, more descriptive sentence. For example:

The man bought a house. (verb + noun)

He did this quickly. (adverb)

The man was young. (adjective)

The young man quickly bought a house.

- Conjunctions can join words, phrases and clauses together. It is essential to teach students to use conjunctions appropriately; especially those who are struggling to compose more than simple sentences. Begin with simple conjunctions to join simple sentences: *and, because, but* and work towards conjunctions such as *if, when, since, after*. Each conjunction must be used in multiple examples to develop the student's understanding of the meaning and effect of each.

Dad was tired and very grumpy.

Dad was tired. Dad was very grumpy.

Sarah bought a hotdog. Sarah was hungry.

Sarah bought a hotdog because she was hungry.

The puppy ran fast. The puppy didn't catch the kitten.

The puppy ran fast but didn't catch the kitten.

PARAGRAPH-LEVEL ACTIVITIES

The structure of a paragraph varies based on the text it is written for (e.g. descriptive, narrative, persuasive); however all typically follow a common pattern. Paragraphs generally begin with a topic sentence which introduces the key content of the paragraph and are followed by sentences supporting or describing the topic. Young or struggling writers should first be taught to construct their paragraph with their topic sentence as the first sentence. When students become more proficient at writing sentences and constructing paragraphs they can be shown how to position a topic sentence in the middle of a paragraph for effect.

- Brainstorm sentences around a given topic such as '*The best animal to have as a pet*'. Ask the class (or individual students) to pick which sentence is the most appropriate as the topic sentence then add another two or three sentences to construct a paragraph.
- Present the students with a number of sentences, one of which is a topic sentence. Ask the students to listen to and read the sentences and then pick which one is the topic sentence, and arrange the remaining to form a paragraph.
- Teach students to leave a line between paragraphs

ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP COMPOSITION OF TEXTS

Many interventions targeting written expression skills follow a framework that cumulatively introduces the process of writing based on planning and outlining, drafting, revising and editing and writing a final copy in a clearly structured, logical sequence. **The process of creating a written text should first be modelled with explicit instruction given for each step and multiple opportunities to practise each stage, before students are expected to apply the process independently.**

Planning and Outlining

Planning to write involves determining purpose and audience, deciding which text type to use, establishing topics, collating information (and researching, if appropriate) and organising ideas.

- Brainstorming: Help students to generate ideas for their texts through brainstorming ideas to support a particular topic (e.g. ideas that may be generated from: 'The Perth Zoo is a great place to visit' include 'lots of animals; in South Perth; family outing; picnic area'). For each idea they generate, help them to create a complete sentence.
- Explicitly teach each step in the planning process using the following guide:
 1. Introduce and discuss a topic.
 2. Identify audience and discuss purpose.
 3. Present a topic sentence to the students, or have them generate one as a group. (Eventually students will be able to do this independently).
 4. Elicit as many supporting details as possible from the class and write them on the board. Record as phrases or key words.
 5. Depending on the topic and number of details, either select three or four of the most important ones or group the details in categories.
 6. Organise details into appropriate sections in a template before starting a draft.

Drafting

Make it clear to the students that a draft is written so it can be improved and corrected. Skipping lines in a draft or using double line spacing when writing on a computer gives space for comments and corrections. The purpose of a draft is to expand on ideas generated in the planning stage by creating sentences or paragraphs.

Revising and Editing

Students should be taught to use an editing strategy such as 'COPS' to check their work for errors in:

- Content (Does it make sense?)
- Organisation (Are the sentences and paragraphs in the correct order?)
- Punctuation
- Spelling

Providing students with checklists for revising and editing according to their age level provides students with a clear structure to check their work and the work of their peers.

Writing a final copy

Spend less time on re-writing work for final or published copies and be selective as to which pieces of students' writing will require a 'polished' final copy. You may allow the student to dictate to a scribe or to type their work. If you decide to take students' writing to this stage make sure you display it where it will be clearly seen.

References and Useful Resources:

Grammar Magic by Christine Killey

Writing Matters: Developing Sentence Skills in Students of All Ages by William Van Cleave

Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills 2nd edition, Judith Birsch (Editor).

Talk for Writing Across the Curriculum by Pie Corbett and Julia Strong

Writing Better: Effective Strategies for Teaching Students with Learning Difficulties by Steve Graham and Karen R. Harris

Powerful Writing Strategies for all Students by Karen Harris, Steve Graham, Linda Mason, Barbara Friendlander.

Videos:

Pie Corbett talks about writing:

<https://global.oup.com/education/content/primary/experts/pie-corbett/?view=ProductList®ion=international>

Talk for Writing:

<http://www.talk4writing.co.uk/resources/>