

Chapter 12

The problems and possibilities of non-fiction writing

David Wray and Maureen Lewis

Wray, D. & Lewis, M. (1999) 'The problems and possibilities of non-fiction writing', in Goodwin, P.(ed.) *The Literate Classroom* London: David Fulton, pp. 91-8

Looking at non-fiction writing

We shall begin by looking at three pieces of non-fiction writing.

Danny is a Year 7 pupil who has been asked to write in a science lesson on how the solar system was made. Here is his explanation:

How was our solar system made. One day a man called god woke up and fancied a change. He said I will have a red planet a green and blue planet and one with rings round it. And a few glowing spots to make it look pretty and I will play basketball spin shots so some spin. Two hours later a massive energy bang it blew god house down. When he opened his eyes he saw his creation and then he lived for 2 whole years after that he died. Before he died he created two humans called Adam and Eve and if it wasn't for him we would not be here today. Nobody knows if there was life on these planets all we know is people live on earth exsept for god he died. We don't know what it looks like here is a picture of what I think it looks like.

Adam (Year 6) has been asked to write an account of the Spanish Armada. Here is the first half page (of three pages altogether) of what he wrote:

'Spanish Armada'

A long time ago in 1588 King Philip II wanted to invade England. Suddenly a letter came from the Netherlands and it said 'I'm sorry but I'm not going to fight with you because I feel sick.' So the genral said none of them are coming to fight us and so it looks like just us and England this time. But in Spain they were building a very big ship called the armada. When they had builte it they had 130 ship in side the armada had 8,000 sailors and 20,000 soldirs and 180 priests to make people Cathlic again.

Finally Edward (Year 5) has written a discussion paper about life in Tudor times. Here are some extracts from his piece:

'Tudor Times'

The issue we are discussing is whether women and children were treated harshly in Tudor times.

Most people living in Tudor times did not think so. They might have argued that children were untamed beasts and when they beat them they would become more tame.

Men might also have argued that women should know their place so that beating them was not wrong .

Nowadays, however, most people think that women and children in Tudor times were treated harshly. They claim that men chose their wives and the parents chose a husband for their daughter which is not fair because they might not love them.

Furthermore they argue that poor people in Tudor times had to work hard at a young age.

My own opinion is that women and children were treated harshly in Tudor times. I believe this because women and children were not treated as individuals.

Most teachers would agree that, while each of these three pieces of writing may be interesting and 'creative', the first two are inadequate responses to the task the children were set. They are both written

in ways which owe more to imaginative stories than to the structures expected of writing in science and history respectively. A large number of children appear to have similar problems in writing and their difficulty is one of matching the way that you write, the style that you choose and the structure that you use to the particular purposes for writing that you encounter in various curriculum subjects.

Yet, in the third piece of writing, the child has apparently solved this problem. His writing is structured to fit the demands of a discussion paper; it shows evidence of appropriate choice of vocabulary and sentence structure. Because of these features it gives the appearance of a much more mature piece of writing. Yet the author, while clearly a reasonably bright child, was younger than the authors of the first two pieces and, in fact, not noticeably a higher achiever in other aspects of school work. How then has he been enabled to produce such writing? It is central to the argument of this chapter that the answer to this question lies in the nature of the teaching that Edward has received, teaching which has ensured that he is aware of the structural and language demands of particular writing tasks and does not approach them with misguided assumptions about how writing works in this context.

What are the essential characteristics of this teaching? These are twofold. First, it rests upon an analysis of the problems that children face in producing effective non-fiction writing and attempts to help them to overcome these problems. Secondly, it is guided by a model of effective teaching. We shall explore both these aspects.

The problems of non-fiction writing

Writing causes several problems for those not skilled at it (and even for those who are!) From talking to teachers and observing children during the Exeter Extending Literacy (EXEL) Project,¹ funded by the Nuffield Foundation, we have identified four major problem areas:

- the problem of the blank page;
- the difference between writing and talking;
- the ‘and then’ syndrome;
- the structure of texts.

We shall now discuss these in more detail.

The problem of the blank page

Most writers will agree that the most difficult part of writing anything is the first line or two. Getting started can be so difficult, even for experienced writers, that they invent a number of ‘delaying tactics’ (sharpening pencils, making coffee and walking around the room) to put off the awful moment. A blank page can be very daunting and for many less experienced writers it can result in abandonment of the writing task. ‘Please Miss, I can’t think what to write’ will be recognisable to many teachers as a familiar response of some children to writing tasks. The blank page has overwhelmed them.

The difference between writing and talking

When talking to another person, the language user receives constant support for his or her language. Talking usually takes the form of a dialogue, i.e. one person says something, this prompts the other person to say something, which in turn prompts the first person to reply, and so on. Talkers thus receive continual prompts for their language production. These prompts also help to model the register in which the language user can join in the ongoing dialogue. We naturally adapt the way that we speak depending upon our relationship with the person that we are speaking with and clues as to an appropriate way to join in a conversation come from the way that the other person speaks.

Writers, on the other hand, do not receive such prompts. They are by themselves, forced to produce language without support from another and to work out for themselves an appropriate register for that language.

Of course, in a classroom, there is potentially support available, from a teacher who may be at a child’s shoulder prompting with such suggestions as: ‘That’s an interesting idea. Tell us more about that.’ ‘You’ve described that well. Can you give some more information about why it was there?’ ‘How exciting! And what will happen next?’

It is difficult, however, in a classroom which may contain up to 35 child writers, for a teacher to be able to provide sufficient of this support to meet the needs of the whole class.

The 'and then' syndrome

Inexperienced writers tend to have a limited range of ways of joining together ideas in writing. Most primary teachers will recognise this by the prevalence of 'and then' in their pupils' writing, as if this were the only way of linking ideas in writing. Mature writing, of course, is characterised by more elaborate ways of joining together ideas, using such connectives as 'furthermore', 'moreover', 'nevertheless', 'on the other hand' and so on. Teachers need to find ways of deliberately introducing these alternative connectives to children and helping them to use them effectively in their writing.

The structure of texts

It does seem to be the case that children often lack experience of different types of text, especially non-fiction texts, and their organisational structures. They need some support in distinguishing between these types in terms of linguistic features such as vocabulary, connectives and structure. A concept which can help to explain and categorise these linguistic differences is that of text genre.

According to genre theory, pieces of writing which share a common purpose will tend to share a common structure. One language purpose might be to provide instructions for someone else to carry out a task, for instance in a recipe. Such instructions, be they spoken or written, will tend to follow the following pattern:

- a statement of the goal (e.g. this is how to make a chocolate cake);
- a list of materials necessary to achieve this. (e.g. you will need...),
- a series of steps to carry out (e.g. first you..., then...).

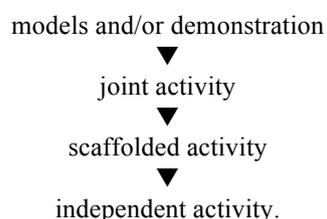
Language patterns such as this tend to become so routine that we are barely aware of them; yet clearly they have to be learnt. Many children will find such structures difficult because they do not have the right expectations about texts. It is quite common, for example, for children to write instructions in the form of a narrative: 'I got some sugar and put it in a mixing bowl. Then I...'. This suggests that teachers need to teach children to use a range of appropriate language structures for appropriate purposes.

In order to do this teachers need themselves to be aware of various text structures. As we have outlined elsewhere (Lewis and Wray 1995) there appear to be six basic factual genres: recount, report, discussion, persuasion, explanation and instructions. Research suggests that primary children obtain a great deal of experience of writing recounts but rarely experience the other genres. This imbalance is important because in later school life and in adulthood these other genres are very heavily used and are crucial to success. Secondary school examinations, for example, demand the ability to write cogent arguments and discussions and if children have not been taught how to structure these forms of writing they will be disadvantaged.

Non-fiction writing - some possibilities

A model for teaching

The model of teaching upon which we have based the work of the EXEL Project is summarised as follows (the thinking underpinning this model has been fully outlined by Wray and Lewis (1997)):



The model stems from the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who put forward the notion that children first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners. The child is firstly a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert (parent or teacher), and then a novice as he or she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the child grows in experience and capability of performing the task, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting the child at problematic points. Eventually, the child assumes full responsibility for the task with the expert still present in the role of a supportive audience. The model seems to make good theoretical sense; yet it can be a little difficult to apply it fully to teaching in a busy over-populated classroom. In particular, it seems that children are too often

expected to move into the independent writing phase before they are really ready and often the pressure to do so is based on the practical problem that teachers are unable to find the time to spend with them in individual support. What is needed is something to span the joint activity and independent activity phase.

We have called this the scaffolded phase, a phase where we offer our pupils strategies to aid writing but strategies that they can use without an adult necessarily being alongside them. One such strategy that we have developed which has become popular is the use of writing frames. These can act both as a way of increasing a child's experience of a particular type of non-fiction writing and as a substitute for the teacher's direct interventions which encourage children to extend their writing.

Some example writing frames

We have space here for only a few examples of the writing frames that we have developed. Further, photocopiable examples can be found in the books by Lewis and Wray (1997, 1998) and a more extensive account of the thinking behind writing frames in the book by Lewis and Wray (1995).

Recount genre

Before I read about this topic I thought that ...
But when I read about it I learnt that ...
I also learnt that ...
Furthermore I learnt that ...
The final thing I learnt was that ...

Explanation genre

I want to explain why ...
There are many reasons for this. The chief reason is ...
Another reason is ...
A further reason is ...
So now you can see why ...

Persuasion genre

Some people argue that ...
But I want to argue that ...
I have several reasons for arguing for this point of view. My first reason is ...
Another reason is ...
Furthermore ...
Therefore, although some people argue that ...
I think that I have shown that ...

Note how writing with the frame overcomes the four writing problems highlighted earlier.

- It no longer presents writers with a blank page. There is comfort in the fact that there is already some writing on this page. We have found that this alone can be enough to encourage weaker writers to write at greater length.
- The frame provides a series of prompts to pupils' writing. Using the frame is rather like having a dialogue with the page and the prompts serve to model the register of that particular piece of writing.
- The frame deliberately includes connectives beyond the simple 'and then'. We have found that extended use of frames such as this can result in pupils spontaneously using these more elaborate connectives in other writing.
- The frame is designed around the typical structure of a particular genre. It thus gives pupils access to this structure and implicitly teaches them a way of writing non-fiction.

How to use writing frames

Use of a frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction (teacher and child or children together) and then to the child undertaking writing supported by the frame. This oral 'teacher-modelling' joint construction pattern of teaching is vital, for it not only models the generic form and teaches the words that signal connections and transitions but also provides opportunities for developing children's oral language and their thinking. Some children, especially children with learning difficulties may need many oral sessions and sessions in which their teacher acts as a scribe before they are ready to attempt their own writing.

It would be useful for teachers to make 'big' versions of the frames for use in the teacher-modelling and joint construction phases. These large frames can be used for shared writing. It is important that the child and the teacher understand that the frame is a supportive draft and words may be crossed out or substituted. Extra sentences may be added or surplus starters crossed out. The frame should be treated as a flexible aid and not a rigid form.

We are convinced that writing in a range of genres is most effective if it is located in meaningful experiences. The concept of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger 1991) suggests that learning is always context dependent. For this reason, we have tended to use the frames within class topic work rather than in isolated study skills lessons. With the advent of the Literacy Hour we would suggest that this contextualisation is even more important as we try to ensure that children can apply the skills that they learn in literacy to other work across the curriculum.

When the children have a purpose for writing, you may decide to offer them a frame as follows:

- When they first attempt independent writing in an unfamiliar genre and a scaffold might be helpful to them.
- When a child or group of children appear stuck in a particular mode of writing, e.g. constantly using 'and then' ... 'and then' when writing an account.
- When they 'wander' between genres in a way that demonstrates a lack of understanding of a particular genre usage, e.g. while writing an instructional text such as a recipe they start in the second person (first you beat the egg) but then shift into a recount (next I stirred in the flour). Mixing genres can of course be a deliberate and creative decision. We must take care to differentiate between those occasions when a child purposely moves between genres and those where different genres are confused.
- When they have written something in one genre (often a personal recount) which would be more appropriate in a different genre, e.g. writing up a science experiment as a personal recount. Although writing accounts from personal experience is a vital part of the process of becoming a writer, we must judge when a child needs help to adopt other genres.

In all these situations we would stress that writing frames are just one of a range of strategies and writing experiences that a teacher would offer to assist the children.

Using frames with a range of writers

We have found writing frames helpful to children of all ages and all abilities (indeed their wide applicability is one of their features). However, teachers have found the frames particularly useful with children of average writing ability and with those who find writing difficult. Teachers have commented on the improved quality (and quantity) of writing that has resulted from using the frames with these children.

It would of course be unnecessary to use the frame with writers already confident and fluent in a particular genre but they can be used to introduce such writers to new genres. Teachers have noted an initial dip in the quality of the writing when comparing the framed 'new genre' writing with the fluent recount writing of an able child. What they have later discovered, however, is that, after only one or two uses of a frame, fluent language users add the genre and its language features to their repertoires and, without using a frame, produce fluent writing of high quality in the genre.

The aim with all children is for them to reach this stage of assimilating the generic structures and language features into their writing repertoires.

Children need to use the frames less and less as their knowledge of a particular form increases. At this later stage, when children begin to show evidence of independent usage, the teacher may need only to have a master copy of the frames available as help cards for those occasions when children need a prompt. A box of such help cards could be a part of the writing area in which children are encouraged to refer to many different aids to their writing. Such a support fits with the general 'procedural facilitation' strategy for children's writing suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). It also seems to be a way into encouraging children to begin to make independent decisions about their own learning.

Also, as pupils become familiar with the frame structures, there are a number of alternative support structures which can be used, such as prompt sheets containing lists of possible ways of connecting ideas together. A number of these will be found in the book by Lewis and Wray (1998).

Pupils' responses to the frames

Using a discussion frame Mark (Year 6) wrote about the arguments for and against a new building project. The frame helped to structure the writing and allowed the pupil access to a difficult form:

‘Environmental change’

In our group we had a discussion about whether it was a good idea to build a new supermarket in the field beside our school.

Some people thought it was a good idea because if you needed some think after school. If you needed some milk you only a couple of yards away.

Other thought it was a really bad idea because the fumes will drift into the playground.

However, I think the main point is the road will be busy and children will be in danger. After considering all the evidence and points of view I think it is a bad idea.

Marissa (Year 4) used a persuasion writing frame to help her to put forward an argument concerning the number of computers in the class:

‘Computers’

Although not evrybody would agree, I want to argue that we need to have more computers in our classrooms. I have several reasons for this point of view. My first reason is that everyone can have their own computer, and they don’t have to wait to take turns.

Furthermore so that the teacher can keep an eye on everyone. Some people might argue they don’t want more computers becasue they might fill up the classroom. I think I have shown that comnputers are very intelligent things. If we had own computers we might get intelligent too and we won’t have to argue over them.

These two pieces of writing represent only a very small selection of those we have collected so far from children across the country. They suggest that the use of writing frames as a teaching strategy for non-fiction writing can significantly enhance children’s writing achievements. Writing frames offer one exciting possibility for developing writing.

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Endnote

¹ The EXEL Project, co-directed by David Wray and Maureen Lewis, has, since 1992, been working with teachers at Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 across the country to develop teaching strategies to improve children’s reading and writing for information.