

Developing non-fiction writing: beyond writing frames

David Wray and Maureen Lewis

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Non-fiction writing: some classroom examples

Non-fiction writing causes problems for young writers, more so even than fiction writing. To pick out some of these problems, we will begin by looking at some examples.

The first piece was written by Danny, a 12 year old student who was asked, in a science lesson, to explain how life began in the solar system. Here is his explanation¹:

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's 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 except for god he died. We don't know what it looks like here is a picture of what I think it looks like.

The second piece is an extract from the writing of 11 year old Adam who was asked to write to explain why the Spanish Armada was launched. Here is the first half page (of 3 pages altogether) of his explanation:

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 general 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 built it they had 130 ship in side the armada had 8,000 sailors and 20,000 solders and 180 priests to make people Catholic again.

Finally, 10 year old Edward has written a discussion paper about life in Tudor times. Here are some extracts from his writing (the complete piece was over 3 pages in length):

¹ The pieces of student writing included in this chapter are used to illustrate particular points about writing structure and language use. Since their authors' transcription skills are not the issue here, they have been typed and edited to include correct spelling, punctuation, etc.

Tudor Times

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

Most people living in Tudor times did not think so. They might have argued that students 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. One man once said, "A woman, a spaniel and an oak tree, the harder you beat them the better they will be". ...

Nowadays, however, most people think that women and students 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 students were treated harshly in Tudor times. I believe this because women and students 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 students were set. They are both written in ways which owe more to imaginative stories than the structures expected of writing in Science and History respectively. A large number of students appear to have similar problems in writing and their difficulty is one of matching the way you write, the style you choose and the structure you use, to the particular purposes for writing that you encounter in various curriculum subjects.

Yet in the third piece of writing, the student 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 maturer piece of writing. Yet the author, while clearly a reasonably bright student, was younger than the authors of the first two pieces and, in fact, not noticeably a higher achiever in other aspects of schoolwork. 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 Edward has received. Such teaching 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? They are two-fold. Firstly, it rests upon an analysis of the problems students face in producing effective non-fiction writing and attempts to help them overcome these problems. Secondly, it is guided by a model of effective teaching. We will explore both these aspects further.

The problems of non-fiction writing

Writing causes several problems for those not skilled at doing it (and even for those who are!) We have identified four major problem areas.

a) 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, 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 the 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 students to writing tasks. The blank page has overwhelmed them.

b) The difference between writing and talking

When talking to another person, the language user receives constant support for his/her language. Talking usually takes the form of a dialogue, that is, 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 model the register in which the language user can join in the on-going dialogue. We naturally adapt the way we speak depending upon our relationship with the listener and clues as to an appropriate way to join in a conversation come from the way 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 student’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 30 or more student writers, for a teacher to be able to provide sufficient of this support to meet the needs of the whole class.

c) The ‘and then’ syndrome

Inexperienced writers tend to have a limited range of ways of joining together ideas in writing. Most teachers will recognise this by the prevalence of ‘and then’ in their students’ 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 students and helping them use them effectively in their writing.

d) The structure of texts

It does seem to be the case that students often lack experience of different types of texts, 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 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, as, for instance, in a recipe. Such instructions, be they spoken or written, will tend to follow the following pattern:

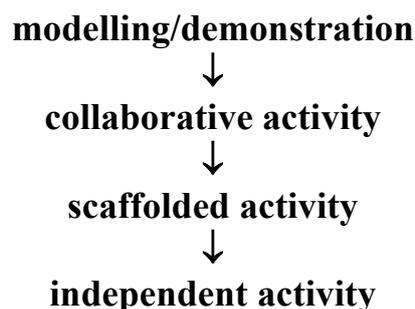
- a statement of the goal. (e.g. This is how to make a chocolate cake.)
- a list of materials necessary to achieve this. (e.g. You will need)
- a series of steps to carry out. (e.g. First you, Then)

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 students will find such structures difficult because they do not have the right expectations about texts. It is quite common, for example, for students 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 students 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 & Wray, 1995) there appear to be six basic factual genres: Recount, Report, Discussion, Persuasion, Explanation and Instructions. Research suggests that primary students get 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 students have not been taught how to structure these forms of writing they will be disadvantaged.

A model for teaching writing

The model of teaching upon which we have based our work is summarised in the following diagram (this thinking underpinning this model is fully outlined in Wray & Lewis, 1997).



The model stems from the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who put forward the notion that learners first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners. The learner is firstly a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert (parent or teacher), then a novice as he/she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the learner grows in experience and capability of performing the task, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting at problematic points. Eventually, the learner 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 students 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 of teachers being unable to find the time to spend with them in individual support. What is needed is something to span the collaborative and independent activity phases.

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

What are writing frames?

A writing frame consists of a skeleton outline to scaffold students' non-fiction writing. The skeleton framework consists of different key words or phrases, according to the particular generic form. The template of starters, connectives and sentence modifiers which constitute a writing frame gives students a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say, rather than getting lost in the form. However, by using the form, students become increasingly familiar with it.

We have space here for only a few examples of the writing frames we have developed. Figures 1 and 2 give examples of frames for two of the six factual genres we described earlier. Further, photocopyable, examples can be found in Lewis & Wray (1997 and 1998) and a more extensive account of the thinking behind writing frames in Lewis & Wray (1995).

Figure 1: A recount writing frame
 Although I already knew that
 I have learnt some new facts. I learnt that
 I also learnt that
 Another fact I learnt was
 However the most interesting thing I learnt was

Figure 2: A discussion writing frame

There is a lot of discussion about whether

The people who agree with this idea, such as, claim that

They also argue that

However there are also strong arguments against this point of view.
believe that

Furthermore

After looking at the different points of view and the evidence for them I think

because

In Figures 3 and 4 we give two examples of the kind of writing which has been achieved using these frames.

Figure 3: A recount written by a 9 year old student using a writing frame

**A trip to Plymouth Museum
Rachel Smith**

Although I already knew that they buried their dead in mummy cases I was surprised that the paint stayed on for all these years.

I have learnt some new facts. I learnt that the River Nile had a god called Hopi. He was in charge of the River Nile and he brought the floods. I also learnt that sometimes people carried a little charm so you tell a lie and you rubbed the charm's tummy and it would be OK. Another fact I learnt was that they put pretend scarab beetles on their hair for decoration.

However the most interesting thing I learnt was they mummified cats and sometimes mice as well.

Figure 4: A discussion written by a 10 year old student using a writing frame

Boxing
Kerry Williams

There is a lot of discussion about whether boxing should be banned. The people who agree with this idea, such as Sarah, claim that if they do carry on boxing they should wear something to protect their heads. They also argue that people who do boxing could have brain damage and get seriously hurt. A further point they make is that most of the people that have died did have families.

However, there are also strong arguments against this point of view. Another group of people believe that boxing should not be banned. They say that why did they invent it if it is a dangerous sport. They say that boxing is a good sport, people enjoy it. A furthermore reason is if they ban boxing it will ruin people's careers.

After looking at the different points of view and the evidence for them I think boxing should be banned because five hundred people have died in boxing since 1884.

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

- a) 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.
- b) The frame provides a series of prompts to students' 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.
- c) The frame deliberately includes connectives beyond the simple 'and then'. We have found that extended use of frames like this can result in students spontaneously using these more elaborate connectives in other writing.
- d) The frame is designed around the typical structure of a particular genre. It thus gives students access to this structure and implicitly teaches them a way of writing non-fiction.

How writing frames can be used

The use of a writing frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction (teacher and student(s) together) and then to the student 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 it also provides opportunities for developing students' oral language and their thinking. Some students, especially those 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 is 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 student 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 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 subject work rather than in isolated study skills lessons.

When the students have a purpose for writing they can be offered a frame:

- when they first attempt independent writing in an unfamiliar genre and a scaffold might be helpful to them;
- when a student/group of students 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. whilst 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);
- 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.

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

Moving beyond writing frames

Writing frames have a clear appeal to teachers in that they can quickly transform students' non-fiction writing from the pseudo-narratives we showed earlier to more appropriately structured and worded pieces. There is, however, a danger if they are not used circumspectly that formulaic writing can result. We have become concerned that frames can in fact be over-used and offer the following comments as a corrective to this.

It should be obvious that students need to use the frames less and less as their knowledge of a particular form increases. At this later stage, when students 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 students need a prompt. A box of such help cards could be a part of the writing area in which students are encouraged to refer to many different aids to their writing. Such a support fits with the general 'procedural facilitation' strategy for students' writing suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). It also seems to be a way into encouraging students to begin to make independent decisions about their own learning.

Also, as students 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 Lewis & Wray (1998) and an example of such a prompt sheet is given in Figure 5.

Figure 5: A persuasive writing prompt sheet

<p>Opening paragraph What is your main argument?</p>	
<p>Arguments What is the most important point you want to make?</p>	
<p>What supporting evidence can you add?</p>	
<p>What is your next point?</p>	
<p>Supporting evidence? Details?</p>	
<p>Continue in this way with any other points you want to make.</p>	
<p>Conclusion Remind the reader what your main point is and ask them to support you.</p>	

Final points (the writing frames health warning)

Writing frames can significantly improve students' non-fiction writing, but the following points seem to us to be crucial to their success as a teaching strategy.

- Use of a frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction and then to the student undertaking writing supported by the frame.
- Not all the students in a class will need to use a writing frame.
- The use of a writing frame should arise when a student has a purpose for undertaking some writing and the appropriate frame is introduced if the student needs extra support. The frame in itself is never a purpose for writing.
- It should be made clear to the students that the frame is just a draft and they should be encouraged to cross out, amend and add to the frame as suits them.
- Frames are only a small part of the varied and rich writing experiences we offer students. They will need wide experience of text written in a range of genres as well as opportunities to write in a variety of contexts.
- Generic structures are not rigid, unchangeable forms. It is not appropriate to teach them in this way.

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