

Critical literacy

David Wray

National Centre for Language and Literacy

Why is critical literacy important?

I was recently working with a Year 6 class on a history project about the Second World War. Among various investigations that we pursued, one group was set the task of gathering information about the Holocaust. As well as collecting suitable books from the class and school libraries, they also spent some time on the Internet-connected computer in the school library. The texts they brought back included the following three paragraphs of a much longer document:

.....
: **A short introduction to the study of Holocaust revisionism**
: **Arthur R. Butz**
: Originally published in the Daily Northwestern of May 13, 1991, corrected May 14;
: source: <http://pubweb.acns.nwu.edu/~abutz/di/intro.html>
:
: I see three principal reasons for the widespread but erroneous belief in the legend of millions of Jews killed by the Germans during World War II: US and British troops found horrible piles of corpses in the west German camps they captured in 1945 (e.g. Dachau and Belsen), there are no longer large communities of Jews in Poland, and historians generally support the legend.
:
: During both world wars Germany was forced to fight typhus, carried by lice in the constant traffic with the east. That is why all accounts of entry into the German concentration camps speak of shaving of hair and showering and other delousing procedures, such as treatment of quarters with the pesticide Zyklon. That was also the main reason for a high death rate in the camps, and the crematoria that existed in all.
:
: When Germany collapsed in chaos then of course all such defenses ceased, and typhus and other diseases became rampant in the camps, which quartered mainly political prisoners, ordinary criminals, homosexuals, conscientious objectors, and Jews conscripted for labor. Hence the horrible scenes, which however had nothing to do with "extermination" or any deliberate policy. Moreover the west German camps involved were not the alleged "extermination camps", which were all in Poland (e.g. Auschwitz and Treblinka) and which were all evacuated or shut down before capture by the Soviets, who found no such scenes.
:
:

This text was simply added to the collection, from which members of the class later worked on extracting and summarizing information. It was not until I sat with the group and we did a careful shared reading of this text that they noticed it was radically at odds with the others they had collected on this subject.

I should point out that this group were all operating at average or above average levels in their literacy. They were all very able to discuss texts in terms of structural features, to explain different uses of connective words and phrases within texts, to talk knowledgeably about tense, active and passive sentences, and vocabulary choice. They had been taught well according to the Literacy Framework. But this ability had only taken them so far. When faced with texts like this, they needed to be able to ask critical questions such as: 'What is the evidence for the claims this text makes?'; 'What is the author trying to convince me of?'; 'How do I know whether to believe this or not?'

Asking questions such as these involves the operation of critical literacy. We are all – adults and children alike – constantly bombarded with text which tries, sometimes blatantly and sometimes extraordinarily subtly, to persuade us to a certain viewpoint or action. Fully-literate people are aware of such persuasion and know how, or whether, to resist it. Critical literacy is a crucial skill for surviving in the information-dense twenty first century.

What is critical literacy?

Of course, critical literacy is not an entirely new concept. Rather like a chameleon, it changes from context to context and is known in different parts of the world by terms such as critical language awareness, critical social literacy, critically-aware literacy. Nevertheless, some common threads run through the different approaches and serve as a useful starting point for discussion.

Firstly, critical literacy rests on an assumption that language education can make a difference in children's lives. Being literate in a 'basic' sense is not enough. Teachers who value critical literacy will thus tend to have a stake in social change and will encourage their pupils to investigate, question and even challenge relationships between language and social practices that advantage some social groups over others.

Secondly, critical literacy approaches assume that the meanings of words and texts (which can be verbal, digital, printed, moving or pictorial) cannot be separated from the cultural and social practices in which – and by which – they are constructed. The way that we use language to read, write, view, speak and listen is never neutral or value-free. Even activities as seemingly benign as reading a picture book to young children are culturally and politically complex. We select texts we deem to be appropriate, which then become naturalised as 'the way things are, or ought to be', potentially excluding children who belong to and identify with different cultures.

Thirdly, critical literacy is about analysis and evaluation. Ira Shor, for example, offers the following definition:

...analytic habits of thinking, reading, writing, speaking, or discussing which go beneath surface impressions, traditional myths, mere opinions, and routine clichés; understanding the social contexts and consequences of any subject matter; discovering the deep meaning of any event, text, technique, process, object, statement, image, or situation; applying that meaning to your own context.

Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. (University of Chicago Press, 1992) page 32

Fourthly, notions of social awareness and active citizenship run through most of the writing about critical literacy. Chris Searle, for example, discusses developing what he calls 'imaginative empathy' (Searle, C. *None but our words*, Open University Press, 1998). He uses a range of texts to encourage pupils to imagine themselves in the lives of others and to write poetry and prose from these different viewpoints. The outcomes include books of professionally produced poetry which challenge the racial and class

tensions that characterize their schools and communities. Seen this way, critical literacy is about transforming taken-for-granted social and language practices or assumptions for the good of as many people as possible.

In the rest of this publication, we will look at various approaches and strategies which can be used to develop critical literacy in primary school pupils, including textual analysis, text clustering, the use of texts for social action and critical writing.

Textual analysis

Here is an extract from *History can be fun* by Munro Leaf, a book I found on the library shelf of a Warwickshire primary school. First published in 1950 in the US, the 1976 British edition is very attractively illustrated and appealingly presented.

.....
: Now that you've read this far you'll know what generally happened as soon as :
: a new country was discovered. Two things, first, other nations came along and :
: tried to get a share, second, the native people, like the Indians and 'red' Indians, :
: found themselves being ruled by white men. With Australia and New Zealand :
: things were better. No other European nation tried to take them, and in Australia :
: there were only a very few black people so that colonists did not have to lead :
: armies against them. In New Zealand there were splendid native people called :
: Maoris and they fought against the British at first. But now the Maoris and the :
: settlers who have come from Britain live peacefully side by side and there are :
: Maori members of the New Zealand Parliament. :
:.....

Passages like this are not uncommon in school history books, especially those written before the 1970s, and can be a useful source of textual analysis practice for primary pupils.

Key points in this text to draw to pupils' attention are:

- The suggestion that countries were unknown before Europeans set foot there: "... as soon as a new country was discovered ...".
- The way the text provides the opinions or viewpoint of one group only: "With Australia and New Zealand things were better." Better for whom?
- The way it minimizes the damage and distress caused by colonization to indigenous peoples: "...the Indians and 'red' Indians found themselves being ruled by white men." "But now the Maoris and the settlers... live peacefully side by side..."

This sort of textual analysis can be guided by asking the pupils to make their way systematically through a list of questions such as the following:

- What is the subject or topic of this text?
- Why might the author have written it?
- Who is it written for? How do you know?
- What values does the author assume the reader holds? How do you know?
- What knowledge does the reader need to bring to the text in order to understand it?
- Who would feel 'left out' in this text and why? Who would feel that the claims made in the text clash with their own values, beliefs or experiences?
- How is the reader 'positioned' in relation to the author (e.g. as a friend, as an opponent, as someone who needs to be persuaded, as invisible, as someone who agrees with the author's views)?

Another approach to analyzing texts is to use a checklist such as CARS (credibility, accuracy, reasonableness, support) below, which was originally developed for use in evaluating web sites. In learning to apply the CARS criteria, pupils will significantly sharpen their critical faculties when engaging with textual information. Further information about each of these criteria is given below.

The CARS checklist

Credibility	What makes this text believable?	<p>What do you know about the author?</p> <p>Is he or she qualified to write about this topic?</p> <p>Have other people checked what the author has written?</p>
Accuracy	Is the information in the text complete and correct?	<p>Is the information up to date?</p> <p>Does the text give a full picture?</p>
Reasonableness	Is the information fair and balanced?	<p>Is the information presented fairly or is it distorted?</p> <p>Is the author trying to persuade you of something?</p> <p>Does the author make claims that seem too strong?</p>
Support	What support is given for the truthfulness of the information in the text?	<p>Are sources of the information listed?</p> <p>Do other sources agree with the information given?</p>

Credibility

Evidence of authenticity and reliability is very important. If we read a newspaper article saying that the area where we live will experience major flooding in the next few weeks, we need to know whether or not to believe the information. Some questions to ask would include: what makes this text believable (or not)? And how does the author know this information?

Tests that help the reader judge the credibility of a text include:

- **Author's credentials** look for biographical details on their education, training, and/or experience in an area relevant to the information. Do they provide contact information (email or postal address, phone number)? What do you know about the author's reputation or previous publications?
- **Quality control** information texts should pass through a review process, where several readers examine and approve the content before it is published. Statements issued in the name of an organization have almost always been seen and approved by several people.

- By the same token, you can sometimes tell by the **tone, style, or competence** of the writing whether or not the information is suspect. Anonymity, bad grammar or misspelled words suggest carelessness or ignorance, neither of which puts the writer in a favourable light.

Accuracy

Information needs to be up to date, factual, detailed, exact, and comprehensive. For example, even though a very credible writer said something that was correct twenty years ago, it may not be correct today. Similarly, a reputable text might be giving up-to-date but incomplete information. Things to bear in mind when judging accuracy include:

- **Timeliness** Some texts, like classic novels and stories, are timeless; others, like texts about computers, have a limited useful life because of rapid advances in knowledge. We must therefore be careful to note when information was created, before deciding whether it is still of value.
- **Comprehensiveness** It is not always possible to give a comprehensive picture: nobody can read every single thing on a subject. It is always a good idea to consult more than one text.

Indicators that a text is inaccurate, either in whole or in part include the absence of a date or an old date on information known to change rapidly; vague or sweeping generalizations; and the failure to acknowledge opposing views.

Reasonableness

Reasonableness involves examining the information for fairness, objectivity and moderateness.

- **Fairness** requires the writer to offer a balanced argument, and to consider claims made by people with opposing views. A good information text will have a calm, reasoned tone, arguing or presenting material thoughtfully.
- Like comprehensiveness, **objectivity** is difficult to achieve. Good writers, however, try to minimize bias.
- **Moderateness** If a text makes a claim that is surprising or hard to believe, the reader needs more evidence than might be required for a lesser claim. Is the information believable? Does it make sense?

Some clues to a lack of reasonableness are: intemperate language (“these stupid people”, “those who believe differently are obviously deranged”); exaggerated claims (“Thousands of children are murdered every day in the United Kingdom”); sweeping statements (“This is the most important idea ever suggested!”); and conflicts of interest (“Welcome to the United Tobacco Company Home Page. To read our report, ‘Cigarettes make you live longer’, click here”).

Support

Support for the writer's argument from other sources strengthens their credibility. It can take various forms:

- **Bibliography and references** What texts did the author use? Are these listed? It is especially important for figures to be documented. Otherwise, the author might just be making up the numbers.
- **Corroboration** It is a good idea to triangulate information, that is to find at least three texts that agree. If other texts do not agree, further research into the range of opinion or disagreement is needed.

Readers should be careful when statistics are presented without identifying the source, or when they cannot find any other texts that present or acknowledge the same information.

Younger children

It should not be assumed that activities such as those I have described are relevant only to older pupils. Jennifer O'Brien has described the work she carried out with her class of 5 to 7 year olds in which they looked critically at texts such as Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox*. After the class had been read the story, they were asked to focus on the character of Mrs Fox and to imagine how the story might have developed if she had not been the physically weak and helpless character portrayed by the author. On another occasion, a group of five year olds were read a story about witches and asked to draw two witches – the first like the one in the story and the second a different one. They then talked about why the author had chosen that particular kind of witch.

O'Brien describes her rationale for activities like these in the following terms: "The question becomes not 'What is this character like?' (thus encouraging students to look through the text as though it is some sort of window and thereby avoid looking at the constructedness of the text) but 'How has the writer decided to portray this character in this text?'" (O'Brien, J. 'Critical literacy in an early childhood classroom: a progress report?'. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 17/1 (1994), pp36–41). She makes it clear that even the youngest pupils have no difficulty with the idea that a text could have been written differently, and thus are capable of engaging in critical literacy activities.

Text clustering

Text clustering involves confronting pupils with texts which obviously contradict each other. The task is to use whatever evidence they can find to try to make judgements about where the truth actually lies. Sometimes these judgements are relatively easy. Some Year 5 pupils, for instance, were recently investigating the planets and found the following conflicting information about Saturn.

<p>1. Four new moons found circling Saturn by BBC News Online science editor Dr David Whitehouse</p> <p>Saturn has become the planet with the greatest number of known moons, 22, following the discovery of four new satellites around it.</p> <p>The four, faint bodies were detected during the past few months by several telescopes around the world. Further studies in the next few months will establish the satellites' precise orbits around the ringed planet.</p> <p>(http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/992494.stm page dated Thursday, 26 October, 2000)</p>	<p>2. New moons discovered around Saturn</p> <p>Astronomers have discovered 12 new moons around Saturn, bringing the planet's tally to 30 – the largest satellite family in the Solar System.</p> <p>The new moons are small, measuring between six and 30 kilometres in diameter, and move in irregular, tilted orbits.</p> <p>They fall into several clusters, leading scientists to conclude that they are the remnants of larger moons fragmented by collisions. The moons probably began life as wandering bodies that were captured by Saturn's gravity.</p> <p>French astronomer Brett Gladman, from the Observatoire de la Cote d'Azur, and colleagues found the moons by scanning Saturn with sophisticated electronic detectors mounted on Earth-based telescopes.</p> <p>Their findings were reported today in the journal <i>Nature</i>.</p> <p>(www.ananova.com/news/story/sm_349369.html page dated Wednesday, 11 July, 2001)</p>
--	---

The children were puzzled about how many moons Saturn actually has, and how to reconcile this conflicting information about when these moons were discovered. Further investigation revealed a third text.

<p>3. Satellites orbiting Saturn (date of discovery in brackets)</p> <p>Pan (1990); Atlas (1980); Prometheus (1980); Janus (1966); Enceladus (1789); Tethys (1684); Telesto (1980); Pandora (1980); Epimetheus (1966); Mimas (1789); Calypso (1980); Dione (1684); Helene (1980); Rhea (1672); Titan (1655); Hyperion (1848); Iapetus (1671); Phoebe (1898).</p> <p>(www.sciencenet.org.uk/database/phys/astronomy/solarsystem/Jupiter/p00958b.html undated page)</p>
--

The pupils' conclusion (with teacher help) was that the number of moons thought to orbit Saturn depended upon the date that the moons had been discovered. Therefore, it was important to pay particular attention to when the text had been written.

Another, longer and more complex activity along these lines is described below. It is given in the form of two literacy hour lesson plans, although it obviously could be carried out in a range of different ways.

Unit of work title: Is spinach good for you?

Lesson 1

Whole class activity (20 minutes)

- Show the class the Ediets web page entitled "Iron – the Not-so-Wimpy Nutrient!" (www.edietsuk.co.uk/news/article.cfm/article_id,1541). The page relates to the topic of "Is eating spinach good for you?" Read the text below – a selection from the web page – together and discuss its meaning.
- Introduce the **For and Against grid** (right).
Ideally you should use an enlarged version of this grid, which can easily be seen by the whole class. With the aid of pupils, enter some points for and against the central question on the grid. Make sure you write 'Ediets' against each point and explain how important it is to record the source of arguments.
- Spend a little time discussing with the class whether the information given on this page is likely to be true or not. You might show them the Ediets home page to try to get a sense of the motivation of this group: they want people to pay to use the service they offer, but there seems no obvious reason why they should be biased about spinach. You might also get the pupils to question the fact that no corroboratory evidence is given for the decimal point mistake. This could itself be a myth.

Is spinach good for you?	
Points for	Points against
Remember to include the source of your information	

Iron – the Not-so-Wimpy Nutrient!
Aileen McGloin

Anyone who grew up watching Popeye eating mounds of spinach knows that iron is one of the essential nutrients. Most people also think that spinach is a pretty good source of this nutrient as a result of this popular cartoon. The truth is that early in this century, when scientists were testing for the iron content of spinach, long before automated printers, they wrote down the wrong results. Someone put the decimal point in the wrong place and for a long time people believed that spinach contained 10 times more iron than it really did. Spinach does contain some iron, but it isn't the best source. Red meat is the best source, so maybe Wimpy, with his love of hamburgers, should have been the one fighting Bluto for the love of Olive Oyle! Iron is also found in oily fish, the dark meat of chicken and turkey and in some nuts, seeds, dried fruits, dark green vegetables and fortified breakfast cereals.

Group activity (30 minutes)

Pupils should work in groups to repeat the above activity using other web pages and building up a list of for and against points on their copies of the grid. Suitable web pages include:

www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/s/spinac80.html

At first sight, this page looks highly scientific and thus, perhaps, more credible, but pupils should be able to spot that the information given here is dated. They are actually warned about this on the most recent version of this web page.

www.wholehealthmd.com/refshelf/foods_view/1,1523,35,00.html

This page seems to be both scientific and up to date, and provides a number of points in support of the idea that spinach is good for you. However, if pupils go to the home page, they will find the statement that the originator of the site, WholeHealthMD.com, "is dedicated to providing the best in complementary and alternative medicine" and is not a mainstream medical company. Pupils could debate whether this makes the information they give more or less reliable.

www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.htm

This page looks very scientific, with a number of impressive tables of information. Table 2, in particular, seems to demonstrate that spinach is a much richer source of iron than any meat product, containing four times as much iron as sirloin steak. Pupils should think carefully, however, about what this table means. The proportions of iron are given as milligrams per 100 calories. Clearly 100 calories worth of spinach takes up a good deal more space than 100 calories worth of steak, so the table is somewhat misleading. They should follow this up by looking at the originators of this web page, The Vegetarian Resource Group, and ask the question about how unbiased a presentation this is likely to be.

www.beefinfo.org/bh_iron.cfm

This web page advances the opposite opinion to the previous one, giving a convincing argument about two types of iron, of which only one is really good for you – the iron that is found in meat, rather than in spinach. Again pupils need to look at the originators of this page, the Beef Information Centre, which is described as "a division of the Canadian Cattlemen's Association", a group with a vested interest in selling beef.

Plenary activity (10 minutes)

- Review the work of the groups so far and discuss their conclusions regarding the likely accuracy of the web sites they have used.

Lesson 2

Whole class activity (20 minutes)

- Introduce the class to the blank discussion writing frame.

Is spinach good for you?
There are contrasting views about this issue. There is some evidence to suggest that
but other evidence suggests that
One piece of evidence that suggests spinach is good for you is that
Along the same lines, it also seems that
Furthermore
However, it is also necessary to consider the following points. Firstly
It is also possible that
It can also be seen that
Taking all these points into consideration it would seem that
I therefore conclude that

- Take the class through the frame, getting suggestions about how it might be completed, modelling the writing of several sections, and also demonstrating how to record details of the sources of the points being made.

Group activity (25 minutes)

- Pupils should now work in groups or individually to complete their own versions of the writing frame, using points they have earlier noted on their grids. They should record the sources of the points they make.

Plenary activity (15 minutes)

- Ask groups or individuals to present the writing they have completed so far. Discuss the merits of the points made and whether the writers have treated them sufficiently fairly or critically.

Follow up activity

- Pupils can complete their writing, using the notes they have made on their grids.
- If they have Internet access at home, they could also be asked to collect some further information about the nutritional value of spinach and, in particular, to research whether the Popeye myth is simply due to a typing error.

Other activities

Other sources of material for text clustering activities include newspaper reports, everyday texts and fairy stories.

Newspaper reports

Collect reports of a current event from four or five newspapers, making sure you include a range of tabloids and broadsheets. Use extracts for shared reading. As you read, demonstrate to the class the kinds of questions you might ask yourself to judge the credibility and accuracy of each report. Ask groups of pupils to compare pairs of reports and to list the questions they have about items which might seem to conflict. Bring the class together to discuss what they have found. Draw their attention to (among other things):

- **Selective quotes** Newspaper reporters will all get their original information from the same speech by a person involved in the event, or the same press release. Why do they often use quotes slightly differently or not at all?
- **Descriptors** Look at the use of adjectives and adverbs in reports. What impression does the newspaper want to create and why?
- **Order** Newspaper editors know that the average reader only ever reads the first couple of paragraphs of any report. What information do they choose to go in these first paragraphs, and which is left until later? Why might they plan things in this way?

Everyday texts

Ask pupils to collect examples of advertisements, brochures and leaflets for the purpose of comparison. Get the pupils to look carefully at how different texts which, on the face of it, are doing similar jobs, are written and structured differently.

As an example of this kind of activity, look at the three texts opposite, each of which was found in a hotel room.



Help Us to Help Our Environment

Environmental care is often a matter of taking little steps which reduce the demands on the earth's natural resources. Help us to do this by kindly considering using the bathroom towels a second time.

Place your towels on the towel rail to USE THEM AGAIN
Place your towels in the bath or shower to CHANGE THEM

Royal Hotel
KIRK WALL

In the interests of the environment

Imagine just how many towels are unnecessarily washed each day in all the hotels throughout the world.

The truckloads of washing powder used, the reservoirs of water needed and the energy consumed to wash and dry them.

Towels placed in the bath/shower means please exchange

Towels replaced on the towel rail means I will use again

Thank you for your co-operation



Dear Guest

HELP US TO HELP OUR ENVIRONMENT

In an effort to exercise the dual responsibility to both you and to the environment Menzies Hotels has introduced a fully ecological bathroom policy.

TOILETRIES

The "Press and Wash System" installed in your bathroom provides products of the highest quality. All products are dermatologically tested, kind to the skin, packaged in recyclable, biodegradable plastic and are not tested on animals.

TOWELLING

To help us reduce the use of laundry chemicals and save precious energy, placing used towels on the bathroom floor will indicate that you wish to be provided with clean linen. Used towels placed on the rack will not be changed.



Registered Office: Menzies Hotels & Leisure Limited,
Law Courts Chambers, 33 Chancery Lane, London WC2A 1EN
Registered in England Number 2519633

Questions to ask about these texts include:

- Two of the texts talk about 'our environment', and one says 'the environment'. What difference does this make to the way the reader responds?
- Two texts ask for the reader's help: 'Help us to help our environment'. One text simply tells us what to do. Again, what effect does this have on the reader?
- Notice the use of '...by kindly considering using these bathroom towels a second time' in the Best Western notice. This is a very gentle way of asking readers to do something. Compare it with the more direct language of the other two texts.
- Why does the Menzies Hotel notice only mention towels after it has told the reader what the hotel has done to help the environment?
- Notice that none of these notices mentions the fact that the less washing the hotel has to do, the smaller its laundry bill will be.

Fairy stories

Younger children will enjoy comparing different versions of well known fairy stories and discussing how these make them feel. One class of 6 year olds were read a version of the story taken from Andrew Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*, first published in 1899, which ends with both Red Riding Hood and the grandmother being eaten by the wolf. This caused great discussion as the children compared other versions that they knew.

One little boy spent a good ten minutes trying to find what he insisted must be a page missing from the story (the bit where the woodcutter comes to rescue Red Riding Hood) and was only persuaded that there was no missing page by looking at the page numbers in the book. Such an activity is a good example of critical literacy as it focuses children's minds on the fact that stories are constructed, from a number of possible alternatives, by an author.

Texts for social action

The importance of authentic literacy experiences for children's literacy development is well established. When pupils are given opportunities to engage in purposeful and 'urgent' reading and writing, they begin to see the point of learning and practising the skills of literacy. Yet it has always been extremely difficult to provide pupils with experiences of this kind. For example, the accepted wisdom is that providing pupils with real audiences will improve their writing skills. Yet even when they are told that the audience is elsewhere, they usually know that the writing will in fact be read and judged only by their teacher.

If we wish our pupils to experience the power of literacy to influence people, then we need at some point to allow them the time and opportunity to use literacy in a socially active way. A good example are the letters sent to many people, including local councillors and the Prime Minister, by children in North Devon following a serious traffic accident outside the school.

59 Sowden park
Forches
Barnstaple
Devon
Ex328ef
17/11/95

Dear Nick Harvey,

Although not every body would agree, I want to argue that: Adults should not drink and drive.

I have several reasons for arguing for this point of view, my first reason is: Drunk people could have a hangover and feel ill but even more they lose concentration and crash! into a child or adult or maybe both. ~~And~~ A further reason is:

We have enough drunk drivers here in Barnstaple, I hate thinking about this matter.

Furthermore I think this is stupid to do nothing about this. Therefore although some argue that I am wrong I think I have shown that (drinking and driving kills!

Yours Sincerely Christopher Tamlin

Sometimes texts for social action require planning. At other times, the teacher needs to be able to step back and allow pupils the space to engage in this socially active literacy as was the case in a Southampton school, which had been the subject of a local newspaper investigation into the quality of dinners. The pupils were outraged by the report and demanded that they be allowed to write to the reporter responsible, one Lucy Hines. One of the letters she received is given below.

Unfortunately the school has no record of having received a reply from the newspaper or from Lucy Hines, which would have demonstrated even more effectively the value of socially active literacy.

Harefield Middle School.
Yeovil Chase,
Harefield,
Southampton.
SO2 5NZ

1/12/95

Dear Sir or Madam,

You are very deceitful, just trying to do a good report, eh? Well I totally disagree with what that Lucy Hines has reported. How COULD she say that the dinner ladies glare down at you and make you eat all your dinner up? If you don't want it, you don't have to eat it. We have the best dinner ladies any school could ever wish for. Mrs Self and her dinner ladies cook the dinners as best they can. And Lucy said that the peas are mushy. Well of course they're mushy, that's why they're called MUSHY PEAS! As for soggy carrots, well they were tinned and grated carrots. If Lucy didn't like them she shouldn't have taken them. And how DARE she lie and say we had lumpy custard and gravy? We didn't even have any of them! In fact here's the menu:

DINNER: Spaghetti Bolognaise, Fish, Burgers, Peas, Carrots, Sweet Corn, Salad, Beetroot, Coleslaw.

PUDDING: Cream Bun, Biscuits, Fruit, Yoghurt, Fruit Juice.

Healthy or what? Well that sly, dopey Lucy Hines should lose her job as far as Harefield Middle School and I are concerned. We are feeling extremely cross about it and most defiant.

Yours Sincerely,

Sophie Thomson

Critical writing

Learning to write effectively teaches children to read more effectively. It is thus possible to argue that one of the most important teaching strategies for developing critical reading is to teach persuasive writing explicitly. How can this be done? One approach involves:

- Providing models of writing and focusing pupils' attention on how these work
- Demonstrating writing processes
- Participating in writing tasks alongside pupils
- Scaffolding pupils in producing writing.

These steps are summarized in the acronym IDES: Immersion, Deconstruction, Exemplification, Scaffolding. For further discussion, see *Practical ways to teach writing* by David Wray (NCLL, 2002).

Immersion

Just as immersion in spoken language is a crucial factor when babies learn to talk, so pupils learning to write persuasively need to be immersed in examples of persuasive writing. We have always tended to surround pupils with texts we perceive to be neutral, simply giving them information rather than trying to persuade them to a particular point of view. There are good reasons for this, of course. Teachers do not want to be accused of trying to influence children through the texts they use, and persuasive texts, by their very nature, can be controversial. However, unless pupils are confronted regularly with such persuasive and controversial texts and, crucially, taught to examine these texts critically, they will find it more difficult to resist the texts they regularly encounter outside the classroom.

The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching requires that in Year 4, Term 3, pupils should be taught:

- 16 to read, compare and evaluate examples of arguments and discussions, e.g. letters to press, articles, discussion of issues in books, e.g. environment, animal welfare
- 17 how arguments are presented, e.g. ordering points to link them together so that one follows from another; how statistics, graphs, etc. can be used to support arguments
- 18 from examples of persuasive writing, to investigate how style and vocabulary are used to convince the intended reader
- 19 to evaluate advertisements for their impact, appeal and honesty, focusing in particular on how information about the product is presented: exaggerated claims, tactics for grabbing attention, linguistic devices, e.g. puns, jingles, alliteration, invented words.

This approach clearly requires the use of persuasive texts of all kinds into the classroom for children to read and study.

Deconstruction

Of course, pupils do not learn how persuasive texts work and how to resist them simply through exposure. They also need to deconstruct these texts: that is, to explore how they are structured, how their style and choice of words make them persuasive. Shared reading is a very useful tool. By closely examining a text together, a great many textual tricks and techniques can be learnt. The text given below is a useful example for Year 5 or 6 pupils.

Meat is murder

Although not everyone would agree with me, I want to argue that eating meat is unhealthy, unethical and unnecessary. Therefore we should not do it.

My first reason for arguing this way is that meat eaters are generally not as healthy as vegetarians. Some studies, for example, have found that people who ate meat were more likely to develop cancer than people who did not. Meat eaters are also more likely to die of heart attacks. If it causes such a risk to your health, why on earth would you want to eat meat?

A further reason that eating meat is wrong is that it causes such cruelty. For instance, animals being taken to the abattoir often travel in terrible conditions and when they arrive, they are treated horrifically. How would you feel if you had to travel hundreds of miles packed tightly in a lorry with no food or water?

Furthermore, I strongly believe that eating meat is totally unnecessary. Some studies have shown, for instance, that we can get 100% (yes! 100%!) of our food requirements from vegetables, dairy products such as milk and cheese, and pulses (beans and lentils). Meat, in fact, provides us with far more calories, protein and fat than we actually need. Therefore, why would you want to eat meat?

Although some people would argue that eating meat is natural, my conviction is that eating meat is wrong. It is bad for our health, bad for the animals and totally unnecessary. I urge you to consider these facts.

I think I have given plenty of reasons why we should ban the eating of meat. Therefore let's ban it now. Meat is murder! We don't need it! It's bad for us. It should be banned.

A listening frame

Listen to the piece of persuasive writing and tick the following words and phrases as you hear them:

- I want to argue that
- My first reason
- For example
- A further reason
- For instance
- Furthermore
- I strongly believe
- How would you feel
- Why would you
- I urge you
- It should be

One way of using this text is to begin by reading it aloud to the class. Each pupil should have in front of them a copy of the listening frame shown above. Ask them to tick the phrases as they hear them. You may need to read the text a couple of times.

Then introduce the class to the analysis chart given on the next page. The pupils may need talking through this a section at a time, or some might be able to work on it as a group.

You will need a great deal of plenary work on this chart to ensure that pupils understand the text features they have been exploring.

Analysing persuasive writing

1. Structure

The piece is organised into sections. Complete the following table:

Section	What is it doing?	How many paragraphs?
1	Introduces the argument	1
2	Makes the first point Gives some examples Finishes with a question	
3		
4		
5		

2. Type of language

Type of language	Example	Your example from the text
emotive	'I strongly believe that ...'	
factual	'we can get 100% of our food requirements ...'	

3. Connective words

Type of connective	Example	Your example
additive	furthermore	
logical	therefore	

4. Language devices

Language device	Example	Your example
pattern of three	unhealthy, unethical and unnecessary	
alliteration	meat is murder	
rhetorical question	why on earth would you want to eat meat?	
involving the audience	I urge <u>you</u> to ...	

Exemplification

Exemplification simply means that the teacher demonstrates how to write persuasive texts; it is the essence of shared writing. Remember that the point of shared writing is not so much the pupils watching the teacher write, but hearing the teacher think aloud as he/she explain the processes involved in the composition. Shared writing has four major purposes:

- 1 It models for children how writers think, making visible the otherwise hidden mental processes that make up writing.
- 2 It provides a demonstration of how to compose, a process that can seem very mysterious to novice writers.
- 3 It provides an active demonstration of the full writing process, including:
 - selecting or clarifying the writing task
 - collecting and connecting information
 - gathering ideas and researching
 - planning
 - transcribing, reading and revising
 - doing final editing and proof reading
 - getting feedback on what has been written.
- 4 It shows that writing needs to be purposeful and written with readers in mind.

Scaffolding

Shared writing should lead to pupils writing independently using similar knowledge and skills to those demonstrated by the teacher. But the jump from teacher demonstration to pupil independence is not usually a rapid or simple one. Especially in writing, learners need support as they begin to work independently, in our case on producing persuasive writing. Such support can take a number of forms.

In collaborative writing, where pupils work together, either with or without a teacher, to compose a piece of persuasive writing, hesitant writers are offered a context for extending their skills. Support comes from other writers who may or may not be more expert at the particular writing task.

In supported writing, pupils write following the guidance of a prompt sheet, like the one illustrated below, which jogs their memories about the key features of the writing they are attempting.

A persuasive writing guide

What will your persuasive writing be about?	
Who is the audience?	
What will be the aim of your writing?	
What illustrations will you use?	
What layout will you use?	
What kind of sentences will you mostly use?	

List some of the words you might use

Alliteration	Exaggeration
Persuasive	Rhyming

name	
date	
title	

Although not everybody would agree, I want to argue that

I have several reasons for arguing for this point of view. My first reason is

A further reason is

Furthermore

Therefore, although some people might argue that

I think I have shown that

Persuasion genre

PERSUASION

Framed writing (above) offers more extensive support, by guiding pupils in the structure of a text, and the use of key connective phrases. For other examples of writing frames, see two publications by Maureen Lewis & David Wray available from the National Centre for Language and Literacy: *Writing frames* and *Writing across the curriculum*.

References

- Searle, C. (1998) *None but our words*, Buckingham: Open University Press
- Shor, I. (1992) *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- O'Brien, J. (1994) Critical literacy in an early childhood classroom: a progress report? *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 17 (1), 36-44
- Wray, D (1992) *Practical ways to teach writing*. Reading: NCLL
- Lewis, M. & Wray, D. (1998) *Writing across the curriculum*. Reading: NCLL
- Lewis, M. & Wray, D. (1998) *Writing frames*. Reading: NCLL

© David Wray 2004

ISBN 070491 4778

National Centre for Language and Literacy
The University of Reading
Bulmershe Court
Reading RG6 1HY
www.ncll.org.uk

Designed and produced by Text Matters
www.textmatters.com