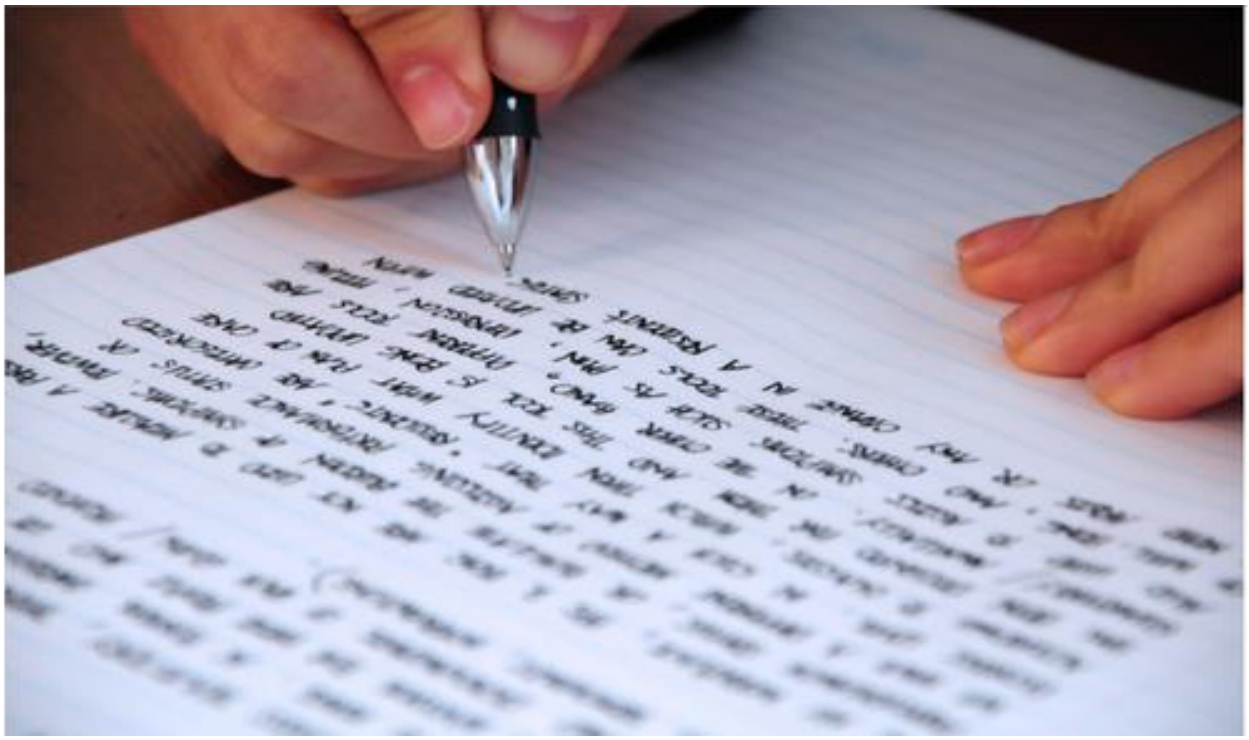
Parents Teachers FOR EXCELLENCE

Excellence in Writing - Inspiring students to write with style

A collection of essays focusing on improving the clarity and style of writing in the classroom.

Foreword – Elizabeth Truss MP (Secretary of State for Trade, Minister for Equalities)



Parents and Teachers for Excellence Writing Collection

A collection of essays focusing on the importance of writing and how best to teach students to become confident writers.

***Contributions from**: Dr Ursula Wingate, Katharine Birbalsingh, Katie Ashford, Matt Carnaby, Jennifer Webb, David Didau, Professor Debra Myhill, Dan Abramson, Tim Coates **Edited by** Joseph De Souza*

Parents and Teachers for Excellence (PTE) is a movement to promote reforms within the education system and to spread good practice to help deliver excellence in schools across the country.
Supported by some of the most respected people working in education, we believe in autonomy for schools, a knowledge-based curriculum, rigorous assessment, cultural enrichment and effective behaviour policies. These are already characteristics of some of the top performing schools in the country.
Our website is regularly updated with content designed to help teachers – and indeed parents – to ensure students receive the best education possible. Please visit www.parentsandteachers.org.uk for more information.

About the Authors

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Tim Coates is a writer and editor who has worked in the book industry for many years. He was head of Waterstones and other European and American book companies. He has worked in historical archives and is known for his series of *Argonaut Papers*. He is the author of *Patsy: the story of Mary Cornwallis West*, *Delane's War* about Florence Nightingale, and most recently *Emil Zadek* about the Velvet Revolution in Prague in 1989.

Contents

Foreword

Liz Truss

I am delighted to introduce this important collection of essays on good writing in schools.

Grammar, spelling and punctuation are vital for expressing yourself clearly. They have long been a fundamental part of a child's education, with grammar one of the original trivium alongside logic and rhetoric.

Their importance has only grown in the present day.

Some may despair about how much time young people have for writing given the advent of the internet and social media. But these new forms of communication mean they have far more practice writing than their parents ever did, as Dan Abramson notes later.

They are seizing new ways to express themselves and learning how to write for specific audiences. And teachers are doing even more to help them avoid common errors by instilling good grammar, as the Michaela Community School's inspirational headteacher Katharine Birbalsingh writes about.

We live in an era of historically high rates of literacy, something we should not take for granted.

Learning how to write well opens the door to the richness of the English language, by far and away the largest language in the world by word count.

Writers develop their own style as they grow in confidence and learn how to make their mark with a choice turn of phrase or a play on words.

They understand why great writers like George Orwell can conclude, after listing his six rules for good writing that you should "break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous".

Something that previously may have been a concern for a few professions, like the copywriter or the journalist, is now a key skill for nearly all jobs.

As a politician, it is my bread and butter. The right words in my speeches and articles can help persuade people of my case, just as the wrong ones from my opponents can put people off from whatever they have to say.

In trade agreements, the meaning of a sentence can change completely depending on the choice of a single word, or however it is phrased.

That is why our negotiators wrangle over every line of any deal we strike. That might take longer, but it ensures once we have dotted the I's and crossed the T's that I can be satisfied it delivers for British interests before signing.

Writing well is vital in other walks of life. It is the skill which allows the scientist to present their theories engagingly to peers and the entrepreneur to pitch their business compellingly to investors and their future customers.

The attention to detail it encourages can be widely applicable, with our digital innovators reviewing the code they write – be it for video games or websites – with the same rigour an author would for their book.

By learning to write with confidence, our children can step out the next chapters of their lives they want to lead.

I am proud to have been part of the Government which introduced a new Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation test in 2013. This ensured that all children were taught the skills they need to understand our language, and to use it properly, creatively and effectively.

These students – after establishing their grasp on the core principles of English grammar - are now undertaking apprenticeships, at university or thriving in the workplace.

This shows the power of a good education, rooted in the fundamentals which have been a big part of what we need to succeed in life. And I am glad Rachel de Souza has brought together the country's top educators to ensure we see more excellence in our classrooms.

Introduction

Dame Rachel de Souza

It is easy to forget the importance and power of writing. Great writing crystallises meaning and reveals new ways of seeing the world. This alchemic quality is by no means unique to fiction. Any prose that conveys complicated ideas yet remains transparent and accessible is the result of careful attention to detail.

Beyond any aesthetic dimension, writing is the best vehicle for communicating thought and presenting arguments. This is primarily why it has such a central place in schools. Often pupils only begin to form their own views via writing. The value of writing extends well beyond school: whether crafting emails or job applications, employers value clear writing. In a variety of different contexts, writing will be one of the most valuable skills that pupils take with them into their professional lives. Writing well will open up new pathways for children from all backgrounds.

In the past there has been concern that writing lags behind other areas.[1] This is not only true for students who are perceived to be struggling or disadvantaged. Anecdotally we have heard professors, even at the very best universities, complain that they have to teach students from scratch how to plan and write an essay. In reality it is difficult to get a grip on how well we teach writing. National exams do not always prioritise the quality of writing. While pupils might lose marks for poor grammar or unclear expression, for the most part, we are testing what they know. This difficulty exists partly due to the way in which we grade, but also because pupils with the relevant knowledge will tend to write more fluently.

We know that a good writing style is not guaranteed by expertise in a subject. As Pinker[2] argues, knowledge can be a cause of poor writing. This happens when a writer fails to realise that their reader lacks experience in the areas they specialise in. The result is cryptic prose with the most basic facts and assumptions left unexplained. There are so many other ways that writing can go awry unrelated to subject knowledge. Grammar and sentence construction are perfect examples of this. While knowledge may be required to write well, we need to recognise that it by no means guarantees good writing. This is one of the reasons why we should look in depth at how we teach writing as a skill and not assume that students will learn how to write as a by-product of a well-rounded curriculum.

In order to see real progress we need to ask questions that go beyond assessment. For instance, do our students leave school able to write confidently at university or work? Do they develop sophisticated arguments or regurgitated answers? Have we set the bar too low with regards to style? A real danger is that we end up satisfied with mediocre writing so long as we feel that students master the content.

First we need to come to an agreement as to what constitutes good writing. For many this is a contentious point. Clearly we regularly disagree about the merits of different writers. And further why should we think that someone who can write

[1] The research evidence on writing, 2012, Department for Education.

[2] Pinker S., The sense of style, 2014, Penguin Books

well at school will fare well when it comes to writing in other circumstances, say as a journalist or as a lawyer?

However, there are crucial skills that almost all good writing requires. The two we are particularly interested in are clarity and argumentation. Clear writing is vital because it ties in closely with communication. With the exception of fiction, clarity is a requirement for all writers regardless of context. Secondly, learning to make arguments independently will be an incredibly useful skill for students and is the central pillar to most academic disciplines.

A Vision for Writing

Parents and Teachers for Excellence have put together this collection for two main reasons. We want to highlight the importance of learning to write well and we want to share examples of best practice in teaching writing. Stressing the importance of writing may seem superfluous given the amount of time that is already devoted to it. But our emphasis is on a more nuanced approach rather than on encouraging further time dedicated to writing. We should acknowledge that aiming for a higher standard of writing in our schools is a worthwhile goal.

Professor Steve Graham[3] argues that a great education system ought to have a vision for how it teaches writing. This involves increasing knowledge of writing within each subject, emphasising the importance of writing across the curriculum and implementing evidence-based methods. With this in mind we have asked for contributions to this booklet from leading academics and teachers who have a proven track record of helping students develop as writers.

A main focus of this collection is the essay. Essays are the primary form of writing in school and often where students struggle the most. Essays are written with a purpose. They present and develop an argument in response to a set question. The importance of the essay should be uncontroversial. Students who can write a great essay can express their ideas clearly, know how to focus on the most relevant information, can entertain multiple viewpoints and respond to them adequately. In short they can think critically and express themselves with clarity.

Dr Ursula Wingate (King's College London) writes convincingly on how ill prepared many school leavers are when it comes to writing academic essays. She argues that many students fail to adopt the correct style and often ignore supporting evidence when making arguments. These points should make us think harder about how we are teaching essay writing.

For a variety of different reasons many of the errors we find when teaching writing stem from assessment. This is true in the case of argumentation as well. Often exam responses reward overly structured answers. Jennifer Webb provides a brilliant contribution on a number of areas that often get overlooked when teaching to the test. She goes on to give advice about some of the best ways to help students develop autonomy in their essays.

[3] Changing How Writing Is Taught, 2019, Graham, S, review of research in education, Volume: 43 issue: 1, page(s): 277-303

Teaching the Basics

Focusing solely on sophisticated notions, such as style and argumentation, there is the risk that we leave those students who are struggling to learn the fundamentals of writing behind. Writing is a complex task that involves a number of disparate skills. It is crucial that we break down the skills involved in writing and reduce the cognitive load, particularly when students are still grappling with writing about new material. In support of this the next section of the booklet is dedicated to explicit writing instruction and examines issues such as scaffolding, sentence construction and grammar.

The Joy of Writing

Every contributor to this collection shares the view that learning to write well presents students with a host of new opportunities. An often overlooked benefit is the enjoyment of writing. Many students feel that writing is a chore and they dread each essay their teacher sets in class. One reason for this is the belief that writing well is something that comes naturally to some and not others. That some students are simply more suited to equations and will never find enjoyment in writing is a prevalent belief amongst children and adults. Dan Abramson challenges this view by exploring how pupils studying STEM subjects can learn to write confidently. Following this we end with a reflection from Tim Coates. He covers the reasons individuals write outside of the classroom and the intricacies behind their motivations. These final contributions remind us that helping children to develop their own voice is a key educational goal. Learning to write confidently and independently is a central part of that process.

How well does secondary school education prepare students for writing at university? *Some insights and recommendations*

Dr Ursula Wingate - King's College London

Having taught undergraduate social sciences students in a British university for more than a decade, I have come to the conclusion that secondary school education does not prepare them sufficiently for academic writing. For many students this means disappointing results in their first year, in which they gradually, almost by trial and error and mostly implicitly, manage to find out what the requirements of academic writing are. To better understand the reasons why a considerable number of students struggle with writing at university, I carried out a study into first-year students' previous writing experience and their expectations of the requirements of academic writing (Wingate 2012, 2015)[4][5]. I also analysed the students' first assignments for features that might have been encouraged at secondary school, but are inappropriate in academic writing. The selected findings that I outline below highlight some shortcomings in the teaching of writing at secondary school and form the basis for a couple of recommendations that I present at the end of this paper.

The research involved two cohorts with a total of 117 students in an undergraduate social science programme. They were given an 'Academic Writing Questionnaire' in their first week at university; in addition, 16 students were interviewed to gain deeper insights into their previous experience and expectations. Of the 117 participants, 103 had taken the traditional A-level route, mostly in secondary schools in England. Only five students had gained the International Baccalaureate (IB) which includes a broader writing experience through the requirement of the 4000-word 'extended essay'. These five students stated that they felt well prepared, whilst 83 percent of the other respondents expressed uncertainty and anxiety about writing at university.

Asked about their previous writing experience, almost all participants stated that they had received either a lot or some advice at secondary school concerning referencing, structure, developing an argument, and writing style. However, a quarter of the students perceived the writing instruction at school as 'spoon-feeding' and 'restrictive'. According to their comments, the teachers told them step

[4] Wingate, U. (2012) 'Argument!' Helping students understand what essay writing is about. Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 11, 2, pp. 145 – 154.

[5] Wingate, U. (2015) Academic Literacy and Student Diversity. The Case for Inclusive Practice. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

by step how to plan and write the assignment; students would also receive comments on various drafts. Restriction was directly mentioned or implicit in the answers of 28 respondents. Their teachers would prescribe not only the structure of the assignment, but also the content. As one student reported, 'essays in history always came with a bullet pointed list of structure and content'. As the following response shows, little leeway was allowed for individuality and independent thought:

All of my course-work was spoon-fed to me. My teachers often re-phrased sentences or added to paragraphs. Also from the start we were told exactly how to structure the content, and the indicative content itself. I don't feel it was truly my own work or a reflection of my ability.

Some students expressed their hope that writing at university would allow them more freedom. One open-ended questionnaire item was 'What is an argument in academic writing?' This question aimed at eliciting students' preparedness to meet a key requirement of academic writing that is argumentation. Only 48 of the 101 answers to this item mentioned that an argument needs to be based on evidence and only 15 students commented that an argument has more than two sides. Considerably more answers explained 'argument' by features that are inadequate in academic writing, but obviously prevalent in school writing, such as 'Argument has two sides' (39 answers), 'Argument means stating your personal opinion (34 answers) or 'Argument means persuasion' (17 answers).

Several interview participants confirmed that they were taught at school that the purpose of essay writing was to 'persuade the reader of your opinion'. These student perceptions suggest that some of the principles of essay writing taught at secondary school are in direct contradiction to the requirements of the academic essay. The concept of argument having two sides suggests that school writing involves simple argument formats such as pro/con or thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Most academic essays, by contrast, require the consideration and synthesis of multiple viewpoints gathered from various scholarly sources. Personal opinions have no place in academic writing; instead, writers are expected to develop a position on the topic/question that is supported by their evaluation of evidence or viewpoints presented in the sources they have studied. When a position is strongly supported by evidence and arguments from sources, persuasion becomes unnecessary and persuasive expressions undesirable. However, persuasive, and often judgmental, language is widespread in students' first assignments, which suggests that this has been encouraged in their writing at school. The following example from my text analysis shows this tendency:

Standardised language is <u>often</u> overtly prestigious. <u>Many would argue</u> that we need some kind of standard to be taught in education to enable us to test literacy rates and comprehension. <u>Of course</u> all varieties of a language are linguistically valid and <u>it is wrong</u> to give one form prestige but we need a functional standard used for official purposes. <u>This proves my point</u> that we need some way of examining the use of the language.

The essay question was whether a single variety of a language should be used for official purposes, given the fact that all varieties are linguistically valid. In the example, persuasive ('often', 'many would argue', of course') and judgemental (it is wrong') expressions are underlined. These statements would need to be

supported by evidence and references to relevant literature (e.g. 'many would argue'); however, the student relies entirely on her own – largely uninformed - opinion ('this proves my point') of which she tries to persuade the reader.

These findings raise three concerns with the teaching of writing at secondary school. First, it seems to suppress the development of student autonomy. This attribute, however, is strongly expected at university, where close guidance, prescription of content and evaluation of drafts are not available. The fact that students have not learned to take control of their writing means that it will be very difficult for them to deal independently with the processes, including planning, researching, reading, writing and revising, of their first assignments at university. Secondly, it does not reflect well on writing instruction at secondary school when so many students arrive at university feeling anxious about academic writing. Should the instruction not have given them some knowledge about the genres they will be required to write and some confidence in dealing with these genres? And genre itself represents the third concern. Why, as it seems, do schools require students to write a genre that does not exist in academia? And in which other context would students need to write an opinion-based, persuasive essay? In other words, secondary school students are taught writing conventions that they have to unlearn at university and that are useless in other context, too.

In view of these shortcomings, the recommendations for teaching writing as part of secondary school subjects are obvious. The first is to explain to students the processes involved in producing a text and then put them in charge of their writing projects. Even if the league tables make teachers feel they have to interfere with their students' writing, other opportunities should be found for developing autonomous writers. The second recommendation is to discuss with students what they will have to write in their chosen subject at university and look at a few exemplars of the required genres (these are easily accessible via the British Academic Written English [BAWE] corpus that contains undergraduate assignments from more than 30 disciplines: www.coventry.ac.uk/bawe). Ideally, some of the subjects' coursework assignments would be aligned to these target genres. Knowing what will be expected at university and having at least seen some examples of the expected writing will greatly reduce the anxiety and uncertainty that students currently feel. Lastly, and most importantly, the useless genre of persuasive essay should be removed from the curriculum and be replaced by some evidence-based writing. This is done on the IB, and students with the IB qualification begin, as mentioned earlier, their university programme with greater confidence and, in my experience over the years, achieve considerably higher results in their first assignments. In my view, it is time that A level subjects adjust their coursework requirements to authentic tasks that prepare students for writing at university.

Essays: independence, crafting and aspiration

Jennifer Webb

Examinations are a snapshot tool, not an aspirational target. When we teach writing, our ambition for students should be independence, clarity, style, nuance and sophistication. Exam specifications, even at A Level, do not require this. They look for students to fulfil a limited set of criteria in which the writing itself is usually just a vehicle for students to be able to show what they have learned. They are just being asked to re-frame the course content in an acceptable package. If we teach writing and set the exam as our end goal, we limit our students to writing great exam responses but, beyond that exam paper, do they know what a truly brilliant essay looks like? Have they developed their own style? Can they independently construct a powerful argument? Are they able to draft, re-draft, interrogate their structure and decide for themselves how their piece should be presented? Such advanced skill is possible, but it takes time, real investment, and skilled teaching beyond the conveyor-belt of exam preparation.

As I write this piece, I am crafting and editing as I go. With every sentence I draft there are subtle changes in vocabulary and structure. I re-read a line and realise that I haven't quite captured my thoughts, so I edit my phrasing and my opinions gain clarity. The act of writing and drafting is a learning process in its own right. Dr Patricia Taylor[6] puts it like this, 'we (academics) value the process of developing new ideas in ways that are only possible through writing.' As teachers, we should value the writing process itself as a way for students to consolidate but also deepen and refine their existing knowledge and understanding. We often set essays as a 'show me what you have learned' task, rather than as a process of exploration and idea development. This assessment focus - constantly trying to check what they can recall - can prevent students from achieving higher levels of understanding.

Clearly assessment is important; we are bound to ensure that our students succeed in exams. Certainly we must devote some time to teaching essay writing skills in line with what students will need to do in a formal examination. In GCSE English Literature, for example, the tasks require rapid fire, 10 minute paragraphs on difficult literary texts, and the function of these essays is to 'show what you know.' It would be remiss of us not to focus time on this skill in KS4. However, if students are taught essay writing as a *process* in a really ambitious way from Y7 onwards, then by the time public examinations are on the horizon, they will have the ability to tackle them whilst also having the foundations of great essay writing which will serve them into their future lives.

Essay writing as a process

When we set essay writing tasks, we should shift from 'show me what you know' essays at the end of a topic, to *process* essays which help to explore and refine ideas *during* a topic. This could work by:

[6] Writing in *Teach Like a Writer*, Webb. J, 2020, John Catt

1. Changing the way we set essay writing tasks – moving from one limited exam-style question, to perhaps three big questions to guide students' initial planning and reading. This will then lead to developing a thesis and clear focus.
2. Building in 'stages of review' as part of the planning and writing process so that students can be guided and steered with challenging questions, peer and teacher feedback.

The idea that the *content* of our argument must be shaped and ordered to develop the strength and direction of that argument is critical. It's also important to note that many students struggle to hold their entire essay in their head, and to make a coherent plan without having some kind of physical representation to work with. I have found for myself that planning *must* have a physical element of some sort, because the organisation of ideas is too complicated otherwise. Great techniques to support planning and shaping arguments include:

- Using mind-maps to outline all the potential elements of an argument. I find it useful to then colour code those ideas to group similar ones together, and then number them to give myself a sense of the order in which they will come.
- Putting points, references and key questions onto separate note cards. This means that students can lay all of these out, see their whole essay in one place, and then move things around at will in order to create a structure which makes sense.

Drafting and crafting

All good things come to those who wait. We've all had those students who want to write something quickly and then move on. Writing, however, is about honing and crafting language - it is as much an art as sculpting in marble, and we should give it the same time and care. I would recommend building in explicit opportunities for students to draft and redraft their work. Students can redraft anything, from a whole essay to a single vocabulary choice, and the best way to teach them how is by modelling it yourself:

1. You can use a visualiser, but this can also be done by projecting a word document and typing directly onto the screen.
2. Model writing a sentence, a paragraph or more. Openly verbalise your thought process as you write - "This word is more effective because… I'm not going to use a metaphor here because it's not appropriate for the tone…"
3. Be ambitious in the level of writing you show students. It is the job of a teacher to show students what is possible, not to limit them by what a data sheet says they are capable of. I would model a grade 8/9 response to students predicted a grade 3. I would then break it down, show them how it is constructed and enable them to access it for themselves. High standards. If we show mediocre models, we will get mediocre results.
4. Actively model the act of redrafting work - take something you have already written and show students how you might interrogate it and improve everything from vocabulary and punctuation to overall structure.

5. Reflect on how the redrafting process has improved the quality of a piece of writing. Get students to do the same for themselves - *What did you change in your second draft? What impact did that have on your work? What could you do to make even more improvements? How are you going to ensure that you replicate this level of writing next time?*

Most important for the classroom teacher is to consider how much *time* we are allowing for the writing process to take place. This level of conscious crafting can't happen in a one hour timed exercise. We must think to ourselves - *What am I asking for? What will students gain from this? Will it have impact in the long term?* If we are in the midst of exam preparation and that is the short term goal, then timed essays have their place. If, however, we are still learning to craft essays, perhaps we should be playing a longer game: explore, plan, craft, redraft.

Style

The idea of style might seem superficial, but what I really mean by 'stylish writing' is that which has a clear voice. Your writing should be an extension of your speech - it has its own patterns, prosody, tone and rhythm and, if we are teaching really well, we should be able to tell our students' *styles* apart from one another.

Developing a style as a writer comes from having a wide array of choices. Students need a broad vocabulary, understanding of syntax, rhetorical devices and the ability to appropriately judge tone. They must then have the opportunity to see a range of high level models and opportunities to practice and develop meaningful skill in their own right. For example, to become a stylish writer in the history classroom, a student should be exposed to:

- Explicit vocabulary instruction of subject specific words and tier 2 words to aid expression. This should include regular spelling tests and exposure to ambitious words in and out of context.
- Models of writing from different historians which are then pulled apart to identify key features such as syntax, word choices, structure, introductions and other conventions of the genre.
- Regular writing practice with the opportunity to redraft and gain meaningful feedback in line with the conventions of academic writing conventions in history.

Style is critical because when a student can comfortably write in their own style, it is far easier for them to explore and express complex opinions without leaning on stale scaffolds. Style is about independence.

Academic conversation: the argument

We often call an essay an 'argument,' but this is something of a misleading term because it implies an over-simplified assessment of pros and cons. It also begs the question: who are we arguing *with*? Students must understand two things:

1. An academic argument is not a simple 'for or against' - it must facilitate nuance and delicacy.
2. By making academic arguments, you are in conversation with the wider body of academic writing and opinion. When you write in the field of history, you

become an historian. When you write in the field of Literature, you become a literary critic.

Our loftiest aim in teaching writing, must be for our students to think and write like academics in their own right. Sometimes, students struggle to see themselves as having worthwhile opinions, and they fall into the trap of repeating what other people have said without really interrogating those ideas; they assume an academic must be right because of the letters after their name. While there is a place for deference, we must train our students to be critical readers and form their own opinions. Much of this is about how our students see themselves - not just as pupils learning about a topic, but as independent thinkers actually *engaging* with that topic. We can train them to do this if we frame discussions where students must build upon what has been said, comment on it, critique and respond to it appropriately. If these are part of our habits in the classroom in speaking and listening activities, students can then build the same argument strategies, phrasing and sentence stems into their writing. Ask questions such as:

- What do you think about that?
- Is that a balanced opinion? Has anything important been missed?
- Can you apply this idea to any other issues?
- Do you know anything which might call this interpretation into question?
- Is this a useful and appropriate way to view this topic?
- What is the most important point this person has made? Why?
- Is there anything from this interpretation which could enhance your own argument?
- Is there anything in this piece which challenges or changes your opinion?

Kenneth Burke[7] uses the analogy of a coffee parlour where the participants are engaged in a never-ending conversation. He suggests that the world of academic discourse is a conversation which many people have a part in - they listen, respond, disagree, build, and the conversation continues to flow as people depart and new participants take up the thread. Our students, too, can be part of that conversation, simply by having and expressing an opinion.

An essay is: a thesis; evidence-guided analysis; consideration of alternative viewpoints. An essay can argue for an idea, explore possibilities, educate and shift perceptions. When we teach this form, we must see *everything* that an essay can be, not just a quick formula for passing an exam.

[7] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Oakland, C.A: University of California Press, pp.110-111

Writing at Michaela

Katharine Birbalsingh and Katie Ashford

Learning to write precisely and accurately is a gift. Writing opens doors to children. When young people are taught to write well, they are better equipped to convey their beliefs and feelings to others with clarity and insight. Writing gives us an opportunity to work through our ideas and to clarify our thoughts on the issues that matter to us most. Good writers have the power to inspire people and to ignite change. As teachers, it is our duty to give our pupils these vital tools so that they too can contribute to the most important conversations of our time.

But learning to write is not easy, and many children fail to master the skill before leaving school. Writing brings together knowledge of grammar, spelling, syntax, punctuation and text structure. These are the basic requirements of writing, and yet in England, 1 in 6 young people leave school functionally illiterate[8] , meaning that they are unable to construct a coherent essay, or convey their thoughts clearly in writing. This is a tragedy, and it is our responsibility as educators to find a way to eliminate illiteracy from our society.

The Challenges of Writing

Some children arrive at secondary school having not yet learned how to spell basic words or construct simple sentences. This sets these children at a significant disadvantage right from the start. If left unchallenged, the problem grows throughout secondary school. To address this gap, teachers must prioritise the explicit teaching of all aspects of writing. When writing is not taught explicitly, these children rarely catch up with their peers. The secondary curriculum typically demands paragraph writing and essay construction from the beginning of year 7. If struggling writers do not learn the basics as soon as possible, they will not be able to access the secondary school curriculum, putting them at a significant disadvantage.

For struggling writers, an essay is simply an impossible task. Having never established the basics of spelling, punctuation and grammar, sitting down to construct a longer piece of writing is overwhelming. Every sentence is a huge step: not only do pupils have to consider the content of their writing, but they have to ensure correct use of capital letters, punctuation, paragraph structure, and so on. Struggling writers find it difficult to hold such a huge amount of information in their heads at once, making the task arduous and slow- and so many give up before they have begun.

Explicit Teaching of Writing

Struggling writers cannot learn to write by accident or osmosis. The intricate skill of writing must not be left to chance. Writing needs to be taught explicitly, with important concepts broken down and explained in depth. Pupils must be given the opportunity to practise applying concepts in a variety of contexts, over and over until they are able to apply them automatically. This can only be achieved

[8] https://literacytrust.org.uk/parents-and-families/adult-literacy/

when teachers teach concepts explicitly. In the past, 'explicit' teaching has been deemed unfashionable, with critics arguing that such an approach hinders a child's creativity. But as has been shown on many occasions, learning the basics of writing sets pupils on the journey towards greater creativity. A child who cannot yet write a sentence accurately must learn to do so before she is asked to write an imaginative story.

At Michaela, we teach writing explicitly, focusing on a number of core concepts. Whilst we do not believe that we have the perfect model, and whilst we are fine-tuning and improving our approaches every day, we believe that our underlying principles have led to significant improvements in our pupils' writing.

Grammar

At the start of year 7, pupils learn the fundamentals of grammar, including the parts of speech. We believe that this is helpful for pupils because it informs later understanding of sentence structure and punctuation use. For instance, take the sentences 'He was a bright, happy boy' and 'She wore a bright red coat'. Why is a comma required in the first sentence, but not the second? Understanding how words fit into sentences makes later understanding of punctuation and word usage much easier.

We teach grammar once per week, focusing on one part of speech per week. Pupils then come to learn the basic sentence structures in English, beginning with 'Subject Verb Object'. This helps pupils to understand precisely what a sentence is. Whilst the notion of the sentence might be instinctive to many fluent readers and writers, it is not obvious to struggling writers. We must teach such concepts explicitly if we are to ensure that our pupils learn the rules of writing thoroughly.

Later in year 7, pupils begin a Direct Instruction programme known as 'Expressive Writing'. This is a scripted programme first conceived by American educationalist Siegfried Engelmann. The programme focuses on the construction of simple sentences, and ensures pupils know how to use capital letters, full stops, commas and quotation marks accurately. The programme provides ample practice including a great deal of recapping activities to ensure that every child masters every aspect of the course before moving on.

A Focus on Sentences

Pupils are given the opportunity to write in every English lesson. However, rather than asking pupils to dive straight in with a paragraph, they are asked to spend time thinking deeply and carefully constructing a number of really excellent sentences. We have been inspired by 'The Writing Revolution', a guide to writing in the classroom by American educator Judith C. Hochman. In this book, Hochman makes a strong argument for the case for reducing the amount of writing in lessons and instead focusing on the quality of writing. Hochman has created many techniques that we use at Michaela. These sentence level activities promote deep thinking about lesson content whilst ensuring that struggling writers are given the opportunity to perfect each sentence they write. After repeated practice of sentence-level writing, pupils grow in confidence, and

are soon more willing and able to tackle longer paragraphs, essays and story-writing.

Frequent Feedback

Of course, even when children feel confident with writing, they still make mistakes. At Michaela we believe that children often make the same mistakes, and so we pre-empt the most common errors and misconceptions to prevent children from making these mistakes. During lessons, teachers circulate around the room giving the pupils encouragement, prompts and reminders so that they can quickly correct mistakes and move on with their writing. Teachers mark work quickly, looking for the most common errors made across the class. The following lesson, the teacher can then stand at the front and say 'Okay everyone - I've looked at your work and lots of us got x wrong. That's okay- but let's learn how to correct that mistake right now'.

Frequent, immediately actionable feedback empowers pupils to improve their writing in the moment. Over time, they stop making these mistakes and learn to write perfect sentences every time. As we have seen at Michaela over the last few years, helping pupils to take small steps towards improving every sentence they write pays huge dividends, particularly for the children who struggle with writing the most.

Conclusion

Writing well is one of the hardest skills to master. It is like running a marathon. To run a marathon, you have to train for a long time, breaking down the skills that make up the whole. You don't just get up and run 26 miles without first having walked and run shorter distances and stretched. Learning to write sentences well is like mastering the shorter distances, before you move on to something more complex.

At Michaela we do our best to scaffold the writing process so that in the end, children can feel successful while writing. After that, anything is possible.

The most efficient ways of teaching writing

Matt Carnaby

There is no greater gift we can give to our children than the ability to read and write. To write can be deeply personal and profound. It's the way in which we etch our impressions of the world. Once read, writing has entered the discourse of society. From the very first mark-making to the production of full sentences, our children make the first tentative steps towards individual expression.

So teaching writing thoroughly is of critical importance, but it is not easy. The process itself can be as mysterious as it is frustrating. In 2018, 22% of students did not reach the expected standard in their writing at KS2. At KS4, the proportion of those that didn't achieve a level 4 pass in GCSE English Language is closer to 30%. According to the metrics against which these students are judged, they have not been gifted the ability to write. My experience as a secondary school English teacher has given me an insight into writing in the classroom, the root of some of the problems and ways in which we might improve it.

Reliance on Summative Writing

When a child writes in a secondary classroom, they are often being expected to articulate a final and complete thought. In summative writing, there is less space to develop your understanding or make sense of the content you're writing about. Further, this 'examification' of writing tells the novice writer the following: writing is only used to capture a complete and final thought, or to assess performance. This is problematic for our most vulnerable students. These are students who have emerging knowledge of how to write and of what they're writing about. For them, this type of writing is fraught with danger. What if they haven't made their mind up yet? What if they are unsure how to phrase their growing understanding?

To be clear: summative writing is not bad. Summative writing has its time and place. However, as Doug Lemov rightly argues it is not the only writing students should be doing. It would be better for students to understand that: writing is an important way of improving your understanding so you can express your own ideas and opinions. Writing becomes a process, not an end point. This is a crucial distinction. In a classroom where students are studying *Oliver Twist* and learning about the character of Bill Sikes, the teacher might ask students to explain what they like or dislike about him in an extract. This writing is formative because it acknowledges that the focus is on an opinion that is open to change, rather than a final answer. That is to say, the student grapples more with what they think of the character, rather than worrying about trying to articulate a final thought. This distinction is especially useful as it highlights the importance of a student thinking through their writing.

However, it is clear that, in order to write successfully, a student needs to be equipped with two key bodies of knowledge: knowledge *of* writing & knowledge *for* writing. If either is not sufficiently grasped, a student may come unstuck.

Knowledge for Writing

We cannot write well about that which we do not know. This is a deceptively simple statement. As proficient and expert writers and teachers, it is easy to overestimate the quality of our instruction and underestimate our tacit knowledge, or 'expert blindness'. For example, I could write with clarity and coherence about Chaucer's use of satire in *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet, I would struggle to write with the same clarity about the impact of the Norman Conquest and its impact on English culture. Students need a solid grasp of the knowledge that they're grappling with. A student with only an emerging understanding of the content they're being asked to write about will not be successful.

Knowledge of Writing

It is impossible to craft sentences, paragraphs, essays without knowledge of conventions and rules. That is to say, to write precisely, a student needs to be able to make sense of a range of grammatical terminology. However, to write with clarity, a student needs not merely to understand grammatical terms, but to be able to apply them. A successful argument could be made that knowledge of grammatical terms in itself is not necessarily a particularly useful thing. For example, I know what the ingredients of a good carrot cake are. This does not mean that I can make it successfully. It is therefore not good enough to know what a full stop is, or know what a comma is. To be able to craft meaning and control a sentence, a student needs to know how to use these pieces of punctuation effectively. The implications of this are profound. A student who has little or no control over how to use commas and full stops will produce writing which will lack clarity and coherence. It won't matter what grasp the student has of content: if he or she does not have an applied understanding of sentence demarcation, they will not be able to control what they are trying to express.

Deliberate Practice

It's easy to assume that the more a child writes, the better they become. Yet in reality, improvement in proficiency is inefficient and often temporary. That is to say, carefully sequenced instruction of writing is needed to efficiently produce more proficient writers.

'How does Dickens present Bill Sikes as a villain?'' This type of 'how' question is common in terminal assessments like GCSE exams and can cause problems when misused in an English classroom. Some teachers falsely presume that practising writing in response to such questions will lead to improvements in proficiency and future outcomes. In reality, a student whose diet consists mainly of writing in this style will only make marginal improvements in the coherence and the quality of their writing. We could argue that the student is performing, not learning.

Counterintuitively, a more successful approach would be to avoid writing at paragraph level and certainly avoid relying on assessment and exam questions initially. This is especially true with novice writers with emerging skill. Instead,

students would find more success in articulating their understanding at sentence level.

For example, 'Although Bill Sikes is a villain, …' & 'Bill Sikes is a villain, so …' [9]

The benefit of the sentence level activity is that it gives the teacher the ability to insert careful parameters. Where writing can be unwieldy and nebulous, here it becomes focused and controlled. By using the parameter of 'although', the student is encouraged to consider contrast. Where the sentence includes the word 'so', the teacher is encouraging the consideration of consequence. In both cases the student is not concerned with the grammatical control of the sentence. The student is spending most of their thinking time considering their understanding of Bill Sikes. That is to say, sentence level activities in this context provide optimum opportunity for the student to experience the success of an accurately crafted sentence. Additionally, this developmental approach can teach the student how to explain their understanding by deliberately practicing specific sentence structures and formative because it allows them to work with knowledge of the text.

K. Anders Ericsson's work on developing skill through deliberate practice is useful to help make sense of this. By consistently answering longer 'how' questions, a student can become overloaded by the performative elements of writing. It's difficult to write when you've only an emerging understanding of how to write and what you're writing about. By working at sentence level however, we are not asking students to do too many things at once and not overloading them. We're considering more efficiently the knowledge we want the student to master within a tight framework to avoid asking them to both be concerned with the structure of the sentence and articulate their understanding. Consequently, the student is learning to explain their understanding and ideas in a variety of ways and thus improving their understanding of how to write.

Of course, some might suggest that answering 'how' questions would be fine as long as the teacher provides a formula for pupils to follow. It could be argued that by using a formula the teacher is scaffolding the thought that needs to be put into the writing, in a similar way to the sentence level work. However, this assumption fails to acknowledge the importance of the student mastering the knowledge required to answer the question and the mechanics of writing to articulate it too.

There are many different components which sit beneath successful writing: grammatical understanding, knowledge of the content and the schemas developed through personal experience. The most effective ways of writing take into account this beautiful complexity. By considering the different cognitive pressures on a student and mediating them, our most vulnerable students can thrive. However, if we fail to think carefully enough about the writing that happens in the classroom, we risk denying children the most precious gift of all: to make themselves understood.

[9] Hochman, J.C & Wexler, N. (2017) The Writing Revolution: Jossey-Bass

How should we teach grammar?

David Didau

As a writer I know that I must select studiously the nouns, pronouns, verbs, absorbs, etcetera, and by a careful syntactical arrangement make readers laugh, reflect or riot.

Maya Angelou, Conversations with Maya Angelou

Every human culture has developed a spoken language and, by inference, a system of grammar. No one ever sits us down and teaches us how to speak, we just soak it up from our environment. All children, regardless of their culture, seem to go through very predictable phases of language acquisition: first they learn nouns, then they start to pick up verbs and then start to combine nouns and verbs with articles, prepositions, pronouns and all the other parts of speech into grammatically coherent and complex language.

In fact, children's ability to intuit previously unheard structures and formulations from minimal grammatical knowledge is remarkable. For instance, when learning English, most children infer that the past tense of the verb to go is 'goed'. But how? No adult ever says this; children independently work out the rule that you add -ed to the end of the verb to indicate that it happened in the past. It's only later we learn 'to go' is an irregular verb and 'went' is the correct formulation.

So, where do the rules of grammar come from? The astonishing fact about language is that it evolves. Its rules are not invented, they're discovered, by each of us independently as we learn to speak, and by linguists as they attempt to catalogue what ordinary speakers actually do.

If the capacity to learn grammar is – at least to some degree – innate, what need is there for formal instruction? The answer, in a nutshell, is writing. It might seem to the casual observer that the way we speak and the way we write is the same, but it's not. Speech is natural. We've been doing it for countless millennia and have evolved a capacity to just pick it up from our environment. Writing is a highly artificial and comparatively recent invention. If you go back to the ancient origins of writing, texts didn't have blank spaces between words; there was no punctuation, no paragraphs: just characters. To make the task of reading less laborious, we've systematically improved writing over the centuries with standardised spelling, punctuation, line breaks, page numbers, chapters, indexes, hyperlinks and a host of other devices to improve our ability to make meaning. None of this is acquired naturally.

Crucially, grammar is not (or at least, not just) a list of rules. In everyday usage, 'grammar' is associated with the 'correct use of the standard language'. But linguists use the term to refer to ways in which words are combined to make sentences, and to label the body of statements they write about the language as they attempt to make explicit the implicit knowledge possessed by all native speakers of English.

Understanding the tension between prescription and description lies at the heart of using grammar to make meaning. Without learning some grammatical metalanguage (language about language) students struggle to think about their grammatical choices. Knowing the names of things makes it infinitely easier to think about and speak about the significance of these choices. Also, teaching becomes much more straightforward if everyone knows the basics. Instead of having to faff about trying to explain how semi colons work, you can simply say, they're used to connect independent clauses. Explicit knowledge of grammar enables students to make decisions about their writing knowingly. And, because grammar is primarily concerned with meaning, metalanguage helps us think more analytically and improves our ability to make sense of other people's use of language, especially in writing. So, what's holding us back? There are three problems which need to be resolved for anyone wanting to teach grammar:

1. Which bits should you teach? There are over 3500 points of English grammar to be learned but how should we select which bits should go into the curriculum?
2. The rules aren't always universally followed, because of the effects of language diversity and change. How and when should grammatical variation be handled within a curriculum?
3. There are often differences of opinion among professional grammarians about the best way of describing a particular point of grammar. Should we avoid the awkward bits?

To help us answer these questions, we need to combine the wisdom of two different traditions: prescriptive and descriptive grammar.

Prescriptive and descriptive views can be easily parodied, with prescriptivists seen as blind adherents to outdated norms of formal usage and descriptivists as advocating an 'anything goes' position and as condemning all forms of linguistic correction. Rather, we should recognise that we need both accurate descriptions of language that are related to situation, purpose and mode and prescriptions that take account of context, appropriateness and the expression of meaning.

The prescriptive view of grammar is that it's possible to lay down rules for the correct use of language. There are two problems with the way this view is often implemented. The first is that sometimes the rules do not relate to the actual language use of native speakers. Examples of flawed prescriptive rules include the suggestion that it is wrong to split infinitives (to blithely wander, to boldly go); that it's incorrect to end a sentence with a dangling preposition (I've got some new music to listen to.); that 'fewer' applies only to countable nouns whereas 'less' must be used for non-countable nouns; that you cannot begin a sentence with a conjunction, and so on. The second problem is that rules that might apply to formal, written language tend not to be appropriate for informal or spoken language.

But some prescriptions are correct. For instance, the rule that determiners must precede nouns is non-negotiable. If someone were to write "I've finished reading book my," it would be unambiguously wrong; no native speaker would ever say

this. The balance required is to work out which prescriptions reflect how language is actually used and which are based on preference and prejudice.

Many prescriptive grammar rules were based on erroneous models of English, following methods of analysing written texts in Classical languages. The rules that govern English are so different that imposing rules from Latin is either hopelessly confusing or irrelevant. For instance, the injunction against split infinitives arises because the infinitive form of a Latin verb is a single word whereas as in English it is two, the subordinator 'to' plus the main verb. Splitting the infinitive in Latin is impossible, doing so in English is common in informal speech. According to corpus studies of spoken language the adverbs 'always' and 'completely' are used more often to split an infinitive than not.[10] And, there are instances where not splitting an infinitive would lead to absurdity or ambiguity. How would you go about unsplitting the infinitive in this sentence?

Profits are expected to more than double this year.

There are times when not splitting the infinitive may be preferable, but the most important impetus for the decision to split or not to split should be clarity. If we are able to knowingly indulge a stylistic preference, then being aware of grammatical conventions is a form of individual liberty.

The descriptive approach to grammar is the product of research into how people actually use language. Many people believe they speak in the same way as they write but, in fact, no-one does. Descriptivists recognise that formal written language follows different grammatical patterns to informal and spoken language. Neither is seen as being right or wrong; all types of language can be shown to follow predictable and logical rules of use.

When it comes to thinking about grammar in the classroom it's not enough to get students to identify the subjunctive mood, distinguish between subordinating and co-ordinating conjunctions, or use fronted adverbial phrases, they also have to know how all these things make meaning. This requires learning about how and why grammatical choices are made.

Semantics and pragmatics are central to the study of descriptive grammar. Semantics investigates the ways meaning is conveyed in language and helps students to ask of grammar, What does this mean? What is its effect? Pragmatics is the study of the reasons for, and effects of, our linguistic choices. The aim should always be to ask why choices are made and to explore their consequences. Taken together, these elements help children use grammatical knowledge to make meaning.

Sadly, due to a lack of understanding about how to make this happen in practice, students have, until recently, tended to get neither prescriptive nor descriptive grammar teaching.

Whenever we point out patterns of grammar, **students should be taught in a way that allows them to ask what the structures their attention is being drawn to are**

[10] Van Gelderen (2004) Grammaticalization as Economy, pp. 245–246.

and what they accomplish. Like our other conceptual lenses, grammar is another facet of English which students should become attuned to noticing.

Whenever they notice grammatical choices in the texts they study they should be able to ask three crucial questions:

- What options were available?
- Why was this one chosen?
- What impact does it have on the reader?

Answering these questions allow students to peer into the minds of other writers, explore their decisions and intentions, and reveal much about the words they choose and the order they choose to arrange them. It also allows students to notice their own grammatical choices. If they are aware of a 'rule' they can deliberately choose to break or bend it to achieve a particular effect. Creating good grammatical habits means students will have greater mental resources for concentrating on the more interesting aspects of the curriculum.

Teaching grammar with a purpose

Professor Debra Myhill

The founders of the creative writing organisation, Arvon, argued that 'All art is achieved through the exercise of a craft, and every craft has its rudiments that must be taught', drawing attention to two key ideas which I will develop in this paper: that writing is a craft, and that it needs to be taught. Thinking of writing as a craft, rather than merely a technical skill, is a reminder that to be a confident and effective writer is not simply a matter of remembering a set of conventions about spelling, punctuation and grammar, it is about developing a feel for language which enables you to make writerly decisions. After all, accurate writing is not necessarily good writing!

But what has this to do with grammar? The public perception of grammar is that it is concerned with rules and accuracy, and that learning grammar is the vaccine to eradicate error. This, however, is a deeply impoverished view of grammar and its salience in the secondary curriculum. It also leads to a parallel perception that grammar is not only dull and tedious, but that it stifles creativity. Many things may stifle creativity in the writing classroom: an absence of time and space to write; enforced topics for writing; formulaic toolkits of literary devices or grammatical structures to 'put in' a piece of writing; too strong a focus on assessment with no opportunity to experiment or take risks… And yes, if grammar is reduced to a set of rules to obey then it too may limit creative thinking and expression. But when taught by creative teachers, grammar is a resource which helps students become sensitive users of language, not compliant to rules but confident in the writerly decisions they make. In our CPD workshops with teachers, we often use a sentence from a novel by former children's laureate, Michael Morpurgo. The point of the activity is to consider the impact of the syntactical structure on the way meaning is conveyed, but one of the most common initial reactions is to point out that Morpurgo begins his sentence with 'And', and, of course, 'You can't start a sentence with 'and'! To which my response is usually, 'But he did – and he is the children's laureate'. Attending to the grammar of our writing is not about exercises in labelling and identifying grammatical structures, or applying dubious rules of usage, it is about thoughtful, critical engagement with the interplay of language choices with meaning. It is not about what grammar is used, but why it is used. The axiom that sentences cannot start with 'and' is not wrong, it simply misses the point. Young writers need to be able to discriminate between a deliberative positioning of 'and' at the beginning of a sentence for a reason, perhaps for emphasis, and the splitting of clauses that should be together into two sentences. Rules cannot explain this distinction, but enabling students to become increasingly discerning in their capacity to discriminate and make choices can. It is one part of an apprenticeship into the craft of writing.

My colleagues and I at the Centre for Research in Writing at the University of Exeter have been researching the relationship between grammar and writing with teachers for over 15 years, and have developed a rich understanding of how to teach grammar purposefully by making relevant connections between

grammar and how meanings are created in text. We advocate a pedagogy where grammar is taught fundamentally as a choice about the best way to achieve the rhetorical or communicative effect that the writer intends. It foregrounds the dual importance of authorial intention – what you, as an author, want this piece of writing to achieve – and thinking about the reader-writer relationship and what choices will fulfil those authorial intentions. It brings together reading and writing in a symbiotic relationship, using published texts as starting-points for exploring the choices made by authors and encouraging students to play with the effect of the choices they make in their own writing. Consider, for example, the relationship between grammatical choice and communicative effect in the following:

- How the balanced co-ordinated clauses in the opening sentence of Orwell's, 1984, evoke the dystopic normality of April sunshine and clocks striking thirteen:
  It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking thirteen.

- How Dickens' choice of noun phrases in his description of Coketown in Hard Times evokes the dehumanising, or even infernal, industrial landscape:
  It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood, it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled.

- How Steinbeck's use of prepositional phrases in Of Mice and Men provides strong visual and spatial detail about the setting of the story:
  A few miles south of Soledad, the Salinas River drops in close to the hillside bank and runs deep and green. The water is warm too, for it has slipped twinkling over the yellow sands in the sunlight before reaching the narrow pool. On one side of the river the golden foothill slopes curve up to the strong and rocky Gabilan Mountains, but on the valley side the water is lined with trees - willows fresh and green with every spring, carrying in their lower leaf junctures the debris of the winter's flooding; and sycamores with mottled, white, recumbent limbs and branches that arch over the pool.

- How the sentence structure, particularly the combination of short single clause sentences with sentences with co-ordinated clauses, creates text rhythm in Malala Yousafazai's speech to the United Nations:
  Dear brothers and sisters, we want schools and education for every child's bright future. We will continue our journey to our destination of peace and education for everyone. No one can stop us. We will speak for our rights and we will bring change through our voice. We must believe in the power and the strength of our words. Our words can change the world.

Teaching grammar as choice involves explicitness about the relationship between grammatical structures and the shaping of meaning in writing. Some students, especially those who are keen readers, may well have strong implicit knowledge about how to write well for different purposes and different

audiences. This is powerful knowledge. But even though all speakers of a language have considerable implicit knowledge about the grammar of speech, including the fundamental rules, many of the students in secondary classrooms do not have the writerly knowledge and understanding to enable effective choice and decision-making about their own writing. Australian linguist, Jim Martin, argues that the lack of explicitness about the expectations for different kinds of writing serves to exacerbate social inequalities in literacy attainment because the over-reliance on implicit knowledge advantages the already advantaged.

In the writing classroom, this explicitness can be strongly supported by ensuring there are multiple opportunities for metalinguistic talk – talk where students verbalise their thinking and reasoning about the choices they have made in their own writing. One benefit of encouraging metalinguistic talk is that it makes visible, through verbalisation, what students do or don't understand, and creates space for collaborative and shared discussion about choices, effects and interpretations. Teachers who ask thoughtful questions which open up metalinguistic thinking, and who invite students to extend, elaborate and justify their responses are fostering communities of writers where students can make informed decisions about their writing, rather than simply following checklists of elements a particular piece of writing should include.

Research investigating the efficacy of this way of approaching the teaching of grammar has shown that it can raise students' attainment in writing. However, to ensure successful learning about the grammatical aspects of crafting writing, the role of the teacher in drawing out the links between grammatical choice and rhetorical effect, and in fostering rich metalinguistic talk is absolutely critical. In these classrooms, where developing writers' linguistic decision-making is nurtured, where grammatical knowledge is seen as a valuable resource for supporting understanding of how different texts are crafted, and where students' authorial voices are valued, teaching grammar increases students' autonomy and agency as writers and is powerfully enabling.

Can mathematicians write?

Dan Abramson

The difficulty with writing is such a presiding teacher anecdote that it might well be considered practitioner lore. For the mathematical student, this presumption is stronger: how could algorithmically-bound thinkers express themselves effectively in the endlessly creative form that is the written word?

The idea that students are bad at writing has been prevalent since at least the Renaissance. Today, the narrative is that students' main exposure to writing is through narcissistic social media posts, and this prevents them from developing the key skills required for academic writing. The Stanford study of writing, a 5-year longitudinal study, found that students (in the 2000s) were writing substantially more than those from any previous generation. Whilst this accounted for their heavy use of email, texts and social media alongside any more formal writing, this broad range of activities helped them to develop a range of tones and styles. Spend a little time on Instagram, and you may note the precision and clarity that its users have mastered in expressing ideas and feelings to their specific audiences – today's young people have far more practice at writing for an audience than ever their parents did.

It is a misconception to think that a scientific programme of study at A Level involves no writing. Pick up a completed A Level Physics paper and alongside the many calculations you'll see equally many explanations, ranging from short sentences to long paragraphs. To produce quality responses, students need to combine their knowledge and understanding of the language and ideas of Physics with the capacity to craft meaningful, intelligible sentences. And in this miniature example there lies a secret. The key to developing good writing skills is first to encourage students to form an idea they want to express, and second to help them express it.

Students often arrive at King's Maths School thinking that they are bad at writing. This perception can be stronger and have more significant consequences that you might imagine – for some, their very decision to go into mathematics and the sciences seems to have been driven as much by this fear and negative self-perception as by their love of the deductive arts. Changing this mind-set isn't easy, but remains essential.

I have observed a striking similarity between these students' experience of being taught to write and the mathematics-haters' experience of learning mathematics. Poor mathematics teaching involves memorising seemingly arbitrary procedures, such as how to solve a quadratic equation, and applying these rules to lists of new equations all of which are variations on the same theme. Too often my students' recollection of GCSE English is similar: they had to learn the key points that should be made when answering standard essay titles, absorb lists of seemingly arbitrary rules for "good writing", and combine these to write responses to new titles all of which were variations on the same themes. In both subjects, the joy of having insights and exploring new ideas is lost, and only the formal and rigid expression of those ideas is kept. Students may acquire isolated skills and may achieve good

examination grades, but they do not gain the confidence and pleasure of thinking mathematically or expressing their ideas in words.

So why can't I just leave my sums-loving students to their arithmetical recreations? The fact that communication is essential to humans was driven home to me recently by reading Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*. Our use of language permits us to share in myths and stories that enable us to collaborate in large numbers in flexible ways. The special nature of the human brain that enables mastery of a natural language at a young age is also universal, binding all cultures and communities together. And what of writing? Writing is the first mechanism through which communication can take place at a distance – of either space or time.

As far as I'm concerned, we get a bit weird about the supremacy of writing, and in particular academic writing, as the apex of communication. Literacy is power, and a certain special form of literacy is power exponentiated. But I respect the value of those forms of literacy and recognise the necessity of having a common standard for our formal communications. One who understands and can deploy that standard can wield the power it provides, and can even subvert it. One who can't is likely to be left out of the conversation entirely. Having the appropriate tools for communication alongside the confidence to wield them will give my students greater access to academia and other exclusive realms of society. More prosaically, they will be prepared for all the written tasks they will face in life, whether that be writing a job application to be a software engineer, producing reports and answering emails, or writing a proposal for the mathematical research that may go on to win them a Fields Medal.

At King's Maths School our solution has been to develop a bespoke programme called the King's Certificate, completed by all year 12 students. Formed in collaboration with King's College London, the King's Certificate is an extended, collaborative research project in a field relevant to the future interests of our students – nearly all of whom go on to study and work in the mathematical sciences. Professionals in industry and academics at the university set briefs for each project and act as project mentors. Students work in teams over the course of the academic year to develop their briefs, and at the end of the programme they publish an article in a King's Maths School journal created for this purpose, and give a presentation to industry partners, KCL academics, staff, parents and governors. These formal end points provide a real and tangible purpose for developing the very oral and written communication skills we view to be important. Over the course of their projects, students research and develop their own ideas. They become invested in what they create, and as such the desire to communicate their ideas coherently and effectively arises naturally. It is at this point that they become genuinely interested to review the nature of formal academic writing, to learn from it and to apply those tropes they deem to be useful in their own work.

Emma Lawsen, whose formal training is in the social sciences, ably leads and coordinates the King's Certificate. She has discovered that her programme enables in our students not only a deeper engagement with the mathematical sciences, but also a refreshed relationship with writing itself. In contrast to a high-stakes public examination, the programme allows students the opportunity to try, to fail, and to improve safely. Their experiments with writing, combined with feedback and a continuous opportunity to improve, are not marred by the fear and pressure created by a grade that will travel with them for life. This year four

students (Tian, Shankaroon, Maria and Irfan) worked on a brief from Dyson to create a calculator that employed differential equations to model indoor air quality. They learnt to view writing as a dynamic, fluid process that involved continuous editing to generate the concise, precise prose they were seeking. As with all our students, after analysing some contemporary journal articles, Emma asked them to produce their own criteria for what "good writing" should be. The lists usually involve terms like 'clear', 'lack of ambiguity', 'honest' and 'reflective'. They never list 'obtuse' or 'esoteric'. Reviewing their own writing against agreed criteria helped to build confidence in their work – if it met the criteria, they could relax and believe that the writing was sound.

In Emma's words, this process is all about "demystifying the hidden curriculum around writing". She encourages students to focus on exactly what is meant – and not on the use of formulaic structures that help them to gain marks in public examinations. The place to pick their battles is on structure, ensuring that the organisation of their ideas is logical. Honesty and a lack of ambiguity come first; subtlety and nuance in style can come later.

In summary, what is essential here is student voice. Given the space to explore ideas in which they are invested, students can readily develop the technicalities of the writing required to express those ideas. In doing so, students will form an enduring and evolving relationship with writing that will aid them well throughout their studies and in whatever professions they choose. Mathematicians can write: they just need something to write about first.

Personal reflections on the value of writing

Tim Coates

About writing

From what is this the opening? *"The day dawned temperate and nearly cloudless. For those heading to an airport, weather conditions could not have been better for a safe and pleasant journey."*

And, what is this about? *"The story must start with the son of a clergyman who, by profession, was an osteopath with consulting rooms in Devonshire Street, W1. His skill was very considerable and he included among his patients many well-known people. He was also an accomplished portrait artist. His sitters included people of much eminence. Yet he was at the same time utterly immoral."*

The answer is that these are both government reports. The first is from the official United States government account of the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade centre in New York, on the 11th of September 2001. The second is from Lord Denning's description of the affair of Christine Keeler and John Profumo in 1963.

Some years ago, I had the good fortune to discover an old series of papers and books, called Blue Books, published by the British Government. Each was compiled, edited and printed upon an occasion of national significance. The practice of publishing inquiry reports started in the 1700s and goes on to this day, although the covers have not been blue since 1939.

The warehouse which contains these publications is in Yorkshire. It has over 20,000 boxes and filing cabinets, with one copy of each report, most of them never opened.

There are several reasons for their fascination. The first is that they contain copies of documents passed between governments and government departments during the course of some momentous event, such as a war, civil unrest, or an incident which provoked the need for an inquiry or perhaps an attempt at civic improvement.

The second is that they are entirely of their time, which is to say they contain nothing of what we call hindsight. The writers, employees of the government or the crown, or those giving witness to an inquiry, faced with dilemma or outrage, or just the need for some factual observation, wrote and reported only what they knew and understood. They did not and could not know the lasting outcome or the consequences of the events they were describing and their judgments were solely those that came naturally to them from their own experience. A reader feels close to the events and shares the anxieties that unfold.

The third attraction is that they are beautifully written. Britain had quite a small civil service in those times, but most of those who rose to positions wherein they

were required to write official documents were well and thoughtfully educated. Their sentences and perceptions have precision, discipline and music, to a standard that has become rare. The pleasure of reading these old books induces a tide of envy at the ease and abundant skill in the craft of writing English. It was not only diplomatic officers who were so accomplished: the same generous and gracious language is to be found among many (although not all) of the explorers, generals, admirals, surveyors and other professionals whose work is included in these collections. It is a shame that, lying behind the forbidding cover of official history, they are not more widely read and known --for they are indeed classic and enjoyable.

My research led to a collection of paperbacks called 'uncovered editions', 'moments of history' and 'argonaut papers'. Many of them are indeed pieces of history we would recognise but of which we have never previously seen the detail, such as the minutes of meetings leading to World War Two, or the accounts of the hospital in Scutari in which Florence Nightingale so quickly and surprisingly became famous.

Florence Nightingale wanted to be Jane Austen. While she never became a great writer, she wrote and wrote, notebook after notebook.

Good writing, which is not easy, and requires practice and diligence, is as wonderful as any art. It is attractive, endearing and difficult to describe.

To receive, or even to see, a short piece that is well written, is like receiving a precious gift.

Yet it costs nothing to do.

Writers labour over their choice of words, the order in which they stand and the rhythm that they make in a sentence. All these things are beauty worth the striving. This is not vague – a sentence must make sense – and that is a hard thing to achieve

Here is another favourite moment

"*Very early morning. The sun was not yet risen, and the whole of Crescent Bay was hidden under a white sea-mist. There was nothing to mark which was beach and where was the sea. A heavy dew had fallen. Big drops hung on the bushes and all the marigolds and the pinks in the bungalow gardens were bowed to the earth with wetness"*

That is from the opening of "At the Bay" by Katherine Mansfield. Look her up. Within a page she gives us the whole of a summer holiday. It is wonderful.

Writing and reading are the most enduring forms of sharing our lives. How dangerous they are.