Literacy Special

Teaching pupils how to speak, read and write like scientists, historians, geographers, mathematicians, artists...
Why every teacher is a teacher of literacy
Making the case for cross-curricular literacy

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Y Kassam's 1994 paper Who Benefits from Illiteracy? argues that "To be literate is to gain a voice and to participate meaningfully and assertively in decisions that affect one's life.

"To be literate," Kassam goes on, "is to gain self-confidence. To be literate is to become self-assertive. Literacy enables people to read their own world and to write their own history. Literacy provides access to written knowledge and knowledge is power.

"In a nutshell, literacy empowers."

Accordingly, over the course of five articles published in SecEd Magazine I will share some proven strategies for planning and teaching cross-curricular oracy, reading, and writing.

But first let's make the case for literacy as a whole-school concern because, as George Sampson said (as long ago as 1922 in his book English for the English), "Every teacher is a teacher of English because every teacher is a teacher in English."

In other words, literacy is not the sole responsibility of English teachers; rather, literacy is the language of learning in every curriculum subject and thus must be actively taught by teachers of every curriculum subject.

What is grammar?

According to the Newbolt Report of 1921, it is ‘impossible to teach English grammar for the simple reason that no one knows exactly what it is’.

So, before we go any further - and bearing in mind how integral an understanding of English grammar is to the development of literacy skills - it might be wise (if not foolhardy) to attempt a definition...

It's possible to define ‘grammar’ in myriad ways but, in my humble opinion, it is a combination of:

**Syntax** - which is the study of sentence structure, an analysis of main and subordinate clauses, of simple, compound and complex sentences, of subjects, verbs and objects, and so on;

**Morphology** - which is the study of word structure, an analysis of stem (or root) words, of prefixes and suffixes, inflections for tense, number and person, and so on;

**Semantics** - which is the study of meaning, an analysis of the things, people, and events we refer to when we're talking, as well as how meanings - both literal (denotation) and implied (connotation) - are conveyed, and how words can mask their true meaning (e.g. through the use of euphemism).

Grammar teaching, therefore, should include the linguistic structure of words, sentences and whole texts, and should cover:

- the word classes (or parts of speech) and their grammatical functions;
- the structure of phrases and clauses and how they can be combined (by coordination and subordination) to make complex sentences;
- paragraph structure and how to form different types of paragraph;
- the structure of whole texts, including cohesion, and the conventions of openings and conclusions in different types of writing; and
- the use of appropriate grammatical terminology in order to reflect on the meaning and clarity of both spoken and written language.

Why is grammar important?

So, if that's what grammar is, why is it important that we teach it and - crucially - do so in every curriculum subject?

Well, according to the now-defunct resource that is the National Literacy Strategy, the only explicit justification for teaching grammar is its contribution to writing skills.

Whilst this is undoubtedly important, I'd go further and argue that grammar teaching also promotes pupils’ understanding and helps them to know, notice, discuss and explore language features.

Grammar teaching may also provide a tool for learning other languages.
Why is literacy a cross-curricular concern?

Of course, many teachers persist in thinking that grammar teaching - and, more widely, teaching literacy - is an English teacher's job not theirs. And yet both the National Curriculum and Ofsted framework make clear that all teachers, not just teachers of English, should regard themselves as teachers of grammar, irrespective of their subject specialism.

What's more, teaching grammar is not the same as teaching English. Grammar - and literacy more generally - is about helping pupils to access the whole curriculum.

Literacy is about helping pupils to read subject information and it's about helping pupils to write in order that they can assimilate this subject information and then demonstrate their learning.

Still unconvinced? Then consider the Ofsted report Removing Barriers to Literacy which concludes that "teachers in a secondary school need to understand that literacy is a key issue regardless of the subject taught".

The report goes on to say that literacy is an important element of teachers' effectiveness as a subject specialist.

Removing Barriers to Literacy also explains how literacy supports learning because "pupils need vocabulary, expression and organisational control to cope with the cognitive demands of all subjects".

The report argues that writing helps pupils to "sustain and order thought", that "better literacy leads to improved self-esteem, motivation and behaviour", and that literacy "allows pupils to learn independently" and is therefore "empowering". Moreover, it argues that "better literacy raises pupils' attainment in all subjects".

Another Ofsted report, Moving English Forward, has this to say about literacy across the curriculum:

"Schools need a coherent policy on developing literacy in all subjects if standards of reading and writing are to be improved. Even with effective teaching in English lessons, progress will be limited if this good practice is not consolidated in the 26 out of 30 lessons each week in a secondary school that are typically lessons other than English."

The debate is, of course, long established and formed a central point of the Bullock report on English published in 1975.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education recently reported that "teachers in a secondary school need to understand that literacy is a key issue regardless of the subject taught".

An approach to cross-curricular literacy

Over the course of this five-part series, I will explore in greater depth the subject of cross-curricular literacy and share some proven strategies for planning and teaching literacy within the context of every school subject.

For example, a teacher of, say, Science, has a responsibility to help pupils learn about science, but they also have a responsibility to help them speak, listen, read and write like a scientist.

In practice, this means that science teachers must possess some specialist knowledge of - for example - the conventions of scientific report-writing and of the ways scientists themselves write about science.

But, perhaps more importantly, it means they must develop an analytical self awareness which enables them to identify how they speak, listen, read and write about science so that those skills can be made explicit for their pupils. And this is best done by explaining, demonstrating, modelling, teaching, and giving feedback.

So, as I say, in this series I will explore the subject of whole-school literacy and share some proven strategies for planning and teaching literacy across the curriculum.

Of course, every school is different and, as such, is likely to face the challenge of improving literacy in a different way, a way borne out of its unique context. Accordingly, your approach to literacy should be influenced by the evidence of what works elsewhere but it should also be informed by your unique context.

What is true of all schools, however, is that the best way to improve literacy is neither extravagant nor exotic; it is always simple and it is always concerned with the fundamentals.

For example, each school should:

- Involve all teachers and demonstrate how they are all engaged in using language to promote learning in their subject
- Identify the particular needs of all pupils in reading, writing, speaking and listening
- Make strong links between school and home
- Plan for the longer term, emphasising the integral relationship between language for learning and effective teaching in all subjects
What’s also true of all schools, is that literacy learning should:

• Be enjoyable, motivating and challenging;
• Be actively engaging;
• Activate prior learning, secure understanding and provide opportunities to apply skills; and
• Develop pupils’ functional and thinking skills.

Literacy across the curriculum in all schools should also operate across three domains: speaking and listening (or oracy); reading; and writing.

Later in this magazine we will look at some generic strategies for embedding literacy across the curriculum and we will consider each of these three domains in turn: speaking and listening, reading, and writing.

To end this article, however, let’s consider some of the skills and techniques required of literacy and language learning…

In order for our pupils to be literate, we need to:

Activate prior knowledge in order to build on what pupils already know;

Model in order to make language conventions and processes explicit;

Scaffold in order to support pupils’ first attempts and build confidence;

Explain in order to clarify and exemplify the best ways of working;

Question in order to probe, draw out and extend pupils’ thinking;

Explore in order to encourage critical thinking;

Investigate in order to encourage enquiry and self-help; and

Discuss and engage in dialogue in order to shape and challenge developing ideas.)
Top 5 tips for embedding literacy

1. Put literacy centre-stage

Literacy across the curriculum needs to be seen as an integral part of teaching, learning and assessment.

In order to highlight this, you could stop calling it literacy, referring to it as ‘language for learning’ instead which might help divorce literacy from the domain of English teachers and place it firmly in the mainstream of teaching, learning and assessment.

Literacy (or ‘language for learning’) also needs to be on the agenda whenever teaching, learning and assessment are discussed. All teachers need to routinely ask ‘How can I use language for learning effectively in order to improve achievement in my subject?’

2. Rome wasn’t built in a day

Literacy needs to become a permanent feature of the school’s development plan.

Literacy cannot be addressed with a one-off training day or by displaying key words around classrooms; it has to become an integral part of the longer-term school improvement agenda and it has to inform the content of development plans in each subject.

This improvement planning process should also involve governors, and developing literacy should became a performance management target for all teachers.

In short, there is no ‘quick fix’ where literacy is concerned. Instead, there needs to be a set of clear aims and a genuine commitment from all staff - including the support of the headteacher and senior team - as well as a sense of urgency.

3. What’s in it for me?

Teaching is a tough job that requires a lot of mental and physical strength and, often, proffers little semblance of a work life balance. Accordingly, when planning any literacy activity you should remember that, like you, your colleagues are busy, hard-working people with challenges of their own.

You should not assume that all teachers will welcome your cross-curricular initiatives. Instead, you need to make clear and explicit the link between literacy and more effective learning in every subject.

Your starting point should be to ask every teacher what literacy skills the pupils in their subject need and what approaches to literacy learning will help them to become a more effective teacher of their subject.

You will need to consider the different forms and purposes of reading and writing in each subject and tailor your approach accordingly. For example, writing will look very different in History than it does in, say, Science and Maths.

4. Share and share alike

Sharing good practice across all subjects is the key to success in raising standards of literacy in your school. For example, teachers of PE are likely to plan and facilitate effective class discussions and group work. By highlighting this you are showing your colleagues in PE that literacy does indeed apply to them and that they are already doing aspects of it well.

By sharing this good practice with other subject areas, you are also helping others to develop effective strategies for discussion and group work - but, crucially, these strategies are not handed down to them in the form of a decree.

If good practice comes from other teachers who are using these strategies in their daily teaching practice rather than in the form of a policy document, it is more likely to be welcomed and adopted by others.

5. The best laid schemes...

Cross-curricular literacy needs to run deeper than simply sharing some teaching strategies, however. And it must be more than an occasional token activity such as sharing key words or marking SPaG.

It is a good starting point to identify an opportunity for a piece of extended writing in a particular subject, but this alone isn’t sufficient either. Rather, it needs to be extended across all subjects and embedded in every scheme of work. This requires departments to reach an agreement about the teaching of writing in their subject.

You need to encourage all teachers to design and deliver subject-specific activities that develop pupils’ reading, writing, and speaking and listening which does not have ‘improving literacy’ as their learning objective.

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'Doing more literacy' is not enough.

For example, the fact that there is more extended writing taking place in school does not in itself ensure that the quality of that writing is improving.

Imaginative initiatives might look good on an action plan but they mean nothing if they don't lead to genuine and sustained improvements.

Accordingly, you need to be clear about the impact of your initiatives on pupil outcomes, as well as whether or not the initiatives represent good value for money and effective deployment of resources (including staffing).

For example, Ofsted say that a school policy of setting aside twenty minutes every day for reading begs the following questions:

- Are all groups of pupils engaged?
- What about the poor reader who sits and pretends to read?
- What about the keen reader who reads for hours outside school?
- What about the teacher who is not a keen reader and remains uncommitted to the idea?

The three domains of literacy

As I've already said, literacy can helpfully be divided into three domains:

1. Speaking and listening (or oracy);
2. Reading; and
3. Writing.

However, a word of warning...

It is common for any one of these strands – speaking and listening, reading, or writing – to be used as if it were synonymous with the wider concept of 'literacy'. However, your approach to literacy across the curriculum should encompass all three - and more besides - and it should also make connections between each of the three and across different subjects...

The Department for Education, for example, say that in order to make a success of literacy across the curriculum schools should offer opportunities for pupils to: “engage in specific activities that develop speaking and listening skills, reading skills, and writing skills “through work that makes cross-curricular links with other subjects”.

And, finally, schools should provide opportunities for pupils to "work in sustained and practical ways, with writers where possible, to learn about the art, craft and discipline of writing"; to "redraft their own work in the light of feedback [which could include] self-evaluation using success criteria, recording and reviewing performances, target-setting and formal and informal use of peer assessment"; and to redraft in a purposeful way helping pupils to move "beyond proofreading for errors to the reshaping of whole texts or parts of texts".

Making connections between the three domains of speaking and listening, reading and writing calls for pupils to develop speaking and listening skills, reading skills, and writing skills “through work that makes cross-curricular links with other subjects”.

In practice, this means that - in order to develop their literacy skills - all pupils should be encouraged to:

- Make extended, independent contributions that develop ideas in depth;
- Make purposeful presentations that allow them to speak with authority on significant subjects;
- Engage with texts that challenge preconceptions and develop understanding beyond the personal and immediate;
- Experiment with language and explore different ways of discovering and shaping their own meanings; and
- Use writing as a means of reflecting on and exploring a range of views and perspectives on the world.
How to teach speaking & listening

Matt Bromley offers his advice on developing pupils’ oracy skills

Speaking and listening is about developing the ability to:

- Listen and respond to others (adding to or arguing against);
- Speak and present (with increasing formality);
- Participate in group discussion and interaction;
- Engage in drama, role-play and performance.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky said that speaking and thinking were intricately linked because the process of speaking helps us to learn by articulating our thoughts and developing the concepts we use to understand the world. He argued that, “Up to a certain point in time, [thought and speech] follow different lines, independently of each other [but] at a certain point these lines meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational”.

Furthermore, Stricht’s Law tells us that “Reading ability in children cannot exceed their listening ability” and Myhill and Fisher assert that “Spoken language forms a constraint, a ceiling not only on the ability to comprehend but also on the ability to write, beyond which literacy cannot progress”.

Classroom talk, therefore, is an important part of literacy development because comprehension derives, not solely from writing and creating, but also from talking. Moreover, communication and understanding improve with practice. Therefore, providing pupils with an opportunity to talk in the classroom is vital if they are to develop their understanding.

Talking also helps build pupils’ vocabulary knowledge - a process that continues across all years and levels of schooling and which is not, therefore, solely in the domain of the early years teacher and not solely in the domain of English teachers. Indeed, every teacher in the secondary phase has a duty to help pupils develop their spoken language and they should continue to help pupils to become more articulate and sophisticated users of the English language.

Here are seven practical ways of achieving this:

Firstly, we should allow more ‘wait time’ following a question. Typically, waiting at least 3 to 5 seconds for pupils to respond to a question is effective because it allows for the thinking time that some pupils need in order to process information before composing an answer. When wait time is increased, answers tend to be more complex.

Secondly, we should model the clear and correct use of spoken language. In other words, we should give unambiguous instructions, use accurate descriptive and positional language, utilise precise terminology where appropriate, and give clear feedback.

Fourthly, we should use simple, direct language and place verbs at the beginning of instructions. ‘Teacher talk’ is not necessarily better than the language pupils access in other environments but it is different. As a result, pupils’ language proficiency might be different from that required to access the curriculum, or even to understand simple classroom instructions.

Confusion and disobedience can result from the fact that pupils are unfamiliar with the language structures and ‘lexical density’ of the more formal teacherly language of the classroom. This does not mean that we should use the same language as our pupils, but that we may sometimes need to use simpler language and emphasise important words.

Fifthly, we should teach active listening skills. Most pupils can hear, but are not naturally active listeners. Active listening requires selective and sustained attention, working memory, cognitive processing, and information storage and recall mechanisms. We can help pupils develop these skills by giving them tasks such as listening for specific or key information, listening to answer specific questions, and listening to follow instructions.
Next, we should teach note-taking skills whereby pupils have to write down the key points ascertained from a piece of spoken language.

Finally, we should build on pupils’ language by elaborating on their answers to questions, adding new information, extending the conversation through further questioning, or reinforcing the language through repetition. We should also develop communication skills such as turn-taking and the use of eye contact.

**Build oracy into daily routines**

In addition to the above, we should make sure that the development of spoken language permeates the school day. After all, spoken language is used all day, every day so we should take advantage and build spoken language activities into daily routines such as during tutor time (e.g. ask a question of each pupil that must be answered in a sentence), when handing out materials, when pupils enter and leave the classroom, and when giving instructions.

We should also make sure that pupils have a regular opportunity to speak. The teacher tends to dominate classroom discussion - and it is right that teachers talk a lot because they are the experts in the room in possession of the knowledge and experience that pupils need. But it is also important that pupils get a chance to interact with the teacher and with each other and to do so beyond responding to closed questions.

What’s more, we should plan opportunities for one-to-one discussion. Spoken language develops best through paired conversation and when one of the people in the pair has a better developed vocabulary. Therefore, it is worth investigating ways of pairing up pupils with people with more sophisticated language skills, perhaps an older pupil or a parent or volunteer. This could be a case of volunteers reading a book with a pupil or simply engaging in conversation. One to one conversation also enables young people to develop conversational skills such as turn-taking, intonation and eye contact.

**Books are the bridge from misery to hope**

Jackie Onassis once said, “There are many little ways to enlarge your child’s world. Love of books is the best of all.”

Accordingly, we should read lots of books with our pupils. Reading is the best way of developing a young person’s vocabulary, particularly if we use the book as a stimulus, a means of initiating conversation by asking questions about the writer’s intentions, about the characters’ motivations, and about the structure and plot, theme and genre, style and so on.

Open questions such as ‘What do you think is going to happen next and why?’ are the most effective because they encourage pupils to develop their language and their cognition. For example, pupils have to make inferences and engage in critical thinking.

Asking pupils to re-tell a story is also effective because it encourages them to master tense, sequencing, and logical reasoning, as well as expanding the imagination.

We should never assume that pupils are too old to be read to: older pupils, including those in the sixth form, enjoy being told a story and they can still learn from the experience because the teacher can highlight sophisticated vocabulary and syntactic structures which pupils may not pick up on if reading alone.

Thinking allowed

As well as reading aloud, we should ‘think aloud’ with our pupils. This involves modelling our cognitive processes, and our logic and reasoning, by making visible the invisible act of thinking - in other words, by making the implicit explicit.

Self-talk is also useful in mediating situations - hearing how we process difficult situations helps pupils to use words to resolve an issue and encourages them to engage in their own self-talk, calming themselves down with language rather than with a physical act.

**Quick wins**

To conclude, here are six ‘quick wins’ for developing pupils’ speaking and listening skills...

- Use fewer ‘what?’ questions and use more ‘why?’ and ‘how?’ questions
- Give pupils time to rehearse answers to questions, perhaps by discussing their answers in pairs before sharing them more widely
- Give pupils thinking time after each question has been asked before they are expected to share their answers
- Enforce a ‘no-hands-up’ policy as often as possible
- Model the kind of language you expect pupils to use in group discussions and answers
- Build pupils’ vocabularies by explicitly teaching the key words in your subject and by repeating key words as often as possible; give key words as homework, and test pupils on their spelling and meaning so that they become the expected discourse of all pupils

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How to teach reading comprehension

Reading is about developing the ability to:

- Decode increasingly complex and challenging words across the curriculum;
- Read for meaning (through the use of reading strategies such as prediction, skimming, scanning, inference, summarising, etc.);
- Understand a writer's craft (analysing the effect of the use of features of form, structure and language);
- Read and engage with a wide variety of texts; and
- Research for a wide range of purposes.

Teaching new words

One of the key aspects of teaching reading skills is the use of subject-specific vocabulary. In order for pupils to understand and be able to use with accuracy words with which they are unfamiliar, we need to introduce those words in a careful sequence.

For example, we could begin by reading aloud a sentence in which the new word appears. Then we could show pupils the word written down and ask them to say it aloud before asking pupils to repeat the word several times. Next, we could debate possible meanings with the class and point out any parts of the word which might help with meaning, for example a prefix or Greek or Latin root.

After this, we could reread the sentence to see if there are any contextual clues and explicitly explain the meaning of the word through simple definition and the use of synonyms. We could provide several examples of the word being used in context, emphasising the word, and ask questions to determine whether or not pupils have understood the word.

We could also provide some sentences for pupils to judge whether or not the word is used correctly and get pupils to write their own sentences using the word. And, once the word has been introduced and reinforced in the lesson, we could explicitly use the word during the course of the next few days in order to reinforce its meaning.

Developing pupils' fluency

Once new subject-specific words have been introduced, we need to help pupils to read these words quickly and accurately, adopting the appropriate intonation. This is called fluency.

Fluency requires a background knowledge of words and a text, as well as a rapid retrieval of the requisite vocabulary. Fluency also requires a knowledge of syntax and grammar in order to predict the words that are likely to appear next.

The ability to adapt one's vocabulary and intonation according to a text's syntax and grammar, and the ability to read ahead assists with both speed and accuracy. Experienced readers integrate these processes so that reading becomes automatic - done without thinking - which allows their cognitive energy to be focused on the task of discerning meaning.

A useful analogy is learning to tie your shoe laces. When you first learn to tie your laces, because it is unfamiliar, you have to dedicate all your attention to it. However, once you have mastered the art of lace-tying - through repeated exposure to it - you begin to do it automatically, without having to think about it and so can do so whilst holding a conversation.
There is a strong correlation between fluency and reading comprehension; indeed, it is such a strong link that fluency and comprehension can be regarded as interdependent. After all, fluency only occurs when a reader understands the text; if reading is hesitant and disjointed, meaning is lost.

It is impossible to be a fluent reader if you have to keep stopping to work out what a word is. To be fluent you have to move beyond the decoding stage to accurately read whole words. Therefore, one of the first skills to teach in order to achieve fluency is accuracy.

A fluent reader has ready access to a vast bank of words which can be used in different contexts. The words to which a reader has immediate access are called their ‘sight vocabulary’. Even complex words that originally had to be decoded – like ‘originally’ and ‘decoded’ rather than monosyllabic function words like ‘that’ and ‘had’ – but which can now be recognised on sight, become a part of the fluent reader’s lexicon.

But recognition is not enough for fluency: as well as being in the reader’s sight vocabulary, words must also be stored in their ‘receptive vocabulary’ - that is to say, words which the reader knows the meaning of. The larger the bank of words that are both recognised and understood on sight, then the broader the range of texts which are accessible.

For this reason, developing pupils’ sight vocabularies and receptive vocabularies are the most effective ways of developing both fluency and reading comprehension.

Once you’ve developed accuracy, you need to develop speed, increasing the rate at which your pupils can access texts. Reading speed is not the same as reading fast. People who read too quickly and therefore show no regard for punctuation, intonation or comprehension are not fluent readers.

Reading speed is about being able to process texts quickly whilst understanding the text and taking account of punctuation and adopting an appropriate intonation. In short, improving pupils’ reading speed is important but it must not be at the expense of comprehension.

After accuracy and speed, prosody - that is to say, reading with expression - is the third component of reading fluently. Prosody is more difficult to achieve than accuracy and speed because it involves developing stress, pitch, and rhythm. However, prosody is essential in rendering reading aloud meaningful.

Poor prosody can cause confusion and has an impact on readers’ interest and motivation to read. Good prosody, meanwhile, makes reading aloud come alive and reflects the author’s message more accurately and more meaningfully.

So how can we help pupils to develop prosody? Here are three suggestions…

1. Read aloud to pupils in an engaging and motivating way in order to model fluency for them.

2. Display high frequency irregular words from your subject around the classroom. Word walls - when they are referred to and used in competitions or quizzes - help build pupils’ automatic recognition of words.

3. Read a text repeatedly in order to provide the practice needed to develop accuracy, speed and confidence.

**Developing pupils’ comprehension**

Understanding what a text means is about much more than decoding or word recognition. The depth of understanding differentiates the weak reader from the strong.

Comprehension is an active process which is heavily dependent on the reader’s spoken language skills, as well as their understanding of word meanings and the syntactic and semantic relationships between words. Comprehension is the ability to engage with a text at a deep level.

Active engagement with a text depends not only on the skill of the reader, but also on the nature of the text…

Broadly speaking, texts can be divided into three levels of comprehension: independent; instructional; and frustration. It’s important to know which kind of text to give to pupils in different situations.

**Texts at the ‘independent level’**

At this level, the reader is able to read most or all of the text with fluency, finding no more than about one word out of every twenty challenging. Pupils should be given texts which are at their independent level for independent reading activities.

By reading fluently, pupils will be able to engage with the material and take meaning from it. They may need strategies in order to decode the odd unfamiliar word but they should be able to do so independently and without losing their thread.

**Texts at the ‘instructional level’**

At this level, the reader finds the text challenging - with one word in ten proving difficult - but manageable, and can read it with support. Support enables pupils who are reading at this more difficult level to access more sophisticated vocabulary and sentence structures.

**Texts at the ‘frustration level’**

At this level, the reader has difficulty with more than one word in ten, and thus finds the text frustrating to read. Ideally, pupils should not be asked to read texts at this level - even with support - because interrupting the text every time they struggle with a word means they grow frustrated and so lose their motivation and enthusiasm.
When working independently, pupils should be given texts to read that fall within their independent level. When involved in guided reading aimed at developing pupils' vocabulary, pupils should be given texts to read that fall within their instructional level. Texts which appear at a pupil's frustration level can still be used in class but only if they are read to them by the teacher. This helps expose pupil to more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax.

Quick wins

To conclude, here are five 'quick wins' for developing pupils' reading skills...

- Teach the reading skills needed in your subject – e.g. skimming, scanning, analysis, and research.
- Present hand-outs in an attractive and accessible way, taking account of pupils' reading ages.
- Include a list of key words at the start of hand-outs.
- Include a 'big picture' question or statement at the start of hand-outs which helps pupils to understand why they are reading it and what help it will provide.
- Ensure that the questions you ask about a text move beyond straightforward comprehension towards exploratory talk involving 'why' and 'how' questions.

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How to teach writing composition

Writing is about developing the ability to:

- Generate, plan and draft ideas for composition;
- Select, shape and construct language for expression and effect in composition;
- Proof-read and redraft written work, drawing on conventions and structures; and
- Use accurate grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Writing has traditionally been one of the weakest areas of literacy teaching because, all too often, teachers assume that imparting knowledge – making sure pupils know stuff – is enough.

In reality, of course, the most common and effective means by which most knowledge is demonstrated and assessed - whether that be in exams or through controlled assessments and coursework, class and homework - is through pupils’ writing.

Writing, therefore, needs to be taught by every teacher who uses writing as a means of demonstrating and assessing learning.

This is not a case of asking teachers to do anything technical or beyond their comfort zones; it's simply about helping pupils to write like a designer or artist or musician or historian or mathematician or scientist and so on...

Teaching writing by reading

The quality of pupils’ writing is usually better when it emerges from reading other people's writing. That doesn’t mean simply displaying a good model of a text on the board, however. Rather, it involves:

1. Modelling: sharing information about a text.

2. Joint construction: working with pupils to create a text collaboratively.

3. Independent construction: pupils constructing a text in a new genre independently of others, albeit with support.

4. Active teaching of vocabulary and sentence structures.

However, here’s a word of warning: we can’t teach writing simply by showing model texts, even if we annotate them to show what makes them work. Instead, we teach writing by writing...

Teaching writing by writing

If we simply show writing exemplars on the board, we are in danger of giving pupils the mistaken impression that writing is a product rather than a process.

Pupils need to see that writing is something that involves making decisions and, for that matter, making mistakes. Pupils need to see their teacher – and that means their teachers in all subjects – writing. This might involve:

Contemplating the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of a text – what is its purpose and who is its audience? The answers to those questions will affect how the text is written both in terms of its language and its presentation.

Examining the conventions of a text – again, this is both in terms of language (formality, style, sentence structure, etc.) and presentation (paragraphs, sequence, bullet points, images, etc.).

Demonstrating how the text might be written - this involves pupils observing the teacher as they ‘think aloud’, explaining the decisions they take. For example, thinking aloud might sound like this: “I need to write this like a historian would write it. It will need to be in the third person, so ‘he/she’ and ‘they’ not ‘I’. It will need to be formal not colloquial but not too stuffy either, it has to be accessible to a wide audience. Now talk to your partner about what your first sentence might say.” This articulation moves from modelling to composition to assessment.

Writing a text whilst providing a running commentary - this involves explaining the decisions that are made, and how words are selected and rejected.
Let’s explore these strategies in more detail…

First, let’s consider how we might help pupils to write texts appropriate to their audience and purpose...

We could use a sequence for teaching writing such as 1 establish clear aims – APT (Audience, Purpose, Technique), 2 provide examples of the text type being produced, 3 explore the main features of presentation and language in the example text.

Then we could read and discuss word, sentence and text-level features and define the conventions of the text type being produced – agree on the main ‘ingredients’ for this kind of writing. We could demonstrate how a text is written by modelling the thought processes (thinking aloud) and compose a text (or the introduction to a text) together as a class.

We could also scaffold pupils’ first attempts – e.g. use writing frames, lists of key words, the beginnings of sentences - and provide time for pupils to write independently.

Second, let’s consider how we might help pupils to sequence and structure information, ideas, and events effectively...

We could, for example, model the planning process for pupils, introducing them to a variety of writing frames including templates for note-making. We could teach the main features of different text types (e.g. instructions are chronological) and could make explicit a sequence for planning which might include: 1 Write initial thoughts and ideas on Post-it notes or cards, 2 Identify key words or phrases which need to be included, 3 Draft the topic sentences and/or sub-headings, and 4 Organise these sentences/sub-headings into a logical sequence.

We could also use visual organisers such as flowcharts, mind maps, graphs and tables, in order to support the planning and writing process.

Third, in order to help pupils construct paragraphs and to make links within and between paragraphs, we could share a paragraphed text with pupils and ask them to identify why each paragraph starts where it does. We could share a paragraphed text with pupils and ask them to give each paragraph a sub-heading which summarises the subject of the paragraph.

Fourth, to help pupils vary their sentences for clarity, purpose and effect, we could encourage them to change the openings of their sentences. For example, we could ask them to write a text in which at least one sentence:

- Starts with a verb ending in ing…
- Starts with a verb ending in ed…
- Starts with an adverb ending ly…
- Starts with a preposition e.g. over, at, on,
- Starts with an adjective e.g. Cold and weary they sank …

We could encourage pupils to vary the lengths of their sentences, too. For example, we could ask them to write a text in which there is at least one:

- Simple sentence
- Compound sentence
- Complex sentence

We could also encourage pupils to vary the purpose of their sentences. For example, we could ask them to write a text in which there is at least one:

- Declarative sentence
- Exclamative sentence
- Inquisitive sentence
- Imperative sentence

And we could encourage pupils to use a range of connectives which go beyond ‘and’ and to use connectives in order to:

- Combine sentences
- Start sentences (with a comma)
- Link sentences and paragraphs
- Express thinking more clearly

Fifth, we could help pupils to write with accurate syntax and punctuation in phrases, clauses and sentences by giving them a series of sentences written in ‘hangman’ style with underscores and punctuation but no letters and ask them identify the sentence types.

We could also get pupils to use sequencing when reviewing and previewing learning to get used to using time prepositions such as:

- Before last lesson, I knew...
- During last lesson, I learnt...
- Since last lesson, I found out...
- By the end of this lesson, I want to know...

What’s more, we could give pupils a text and ask them to highlight the main and subordinate clauses in different colours and then explain the effect. And we could give pupils three complex sentences which make different uses of main clauses and subordinate clauses (main + subordinate, subordinate + main, and main + embedded subordinate) and ask them to identify the different clauses and explain their answers.

Sixth, in order to help pupils to select appropriate and effective vocabulary, we could teach the use of synonyms – e.g. identify a word in a sentence and ask pupils to think of a list of alternative words which have the same meaning. This will improve their vocabulary and the quality of their writing. We could focus on providing alternatives for high frequency words such as ‘said’ and ‘walked’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imperative sentence</th>
<th>Declarative sentence</th>
<th>Exclamative sentence</th>
<th>Inquisitive sentence</th>
<th>Compound sentence</th>
<th>Complex sentence</th>
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We could also get pupils to play word detectives using thesauruses and dictionaries to find the meaning of words.

Finally, in order to help pupils to use the correct spelling, we could teach them how to:

- Break words into sounds/phonemes (p-a-r-t-y)
- Break words into syllables (dem-o-c-ra-cy)
- Break words into an affix and root word (un + happy)
- Use a mnemonic (Big Elephants Can Always Upset Small Elephants for BECAUSE or one Collar two Sleeves for neCeSSary)

  * Refer to different words in the same family (chemical, chemist, chemistry)
  * Over-articulate silent or hidden letters (Wed-nes-day)
  * Identify words within words (GUM in argument)
  * Refer to a word's etymology / history (tri = three, pod = foot)
  * Use analogy (through, rough, enough)
  * Use a key word (I'm – to remember a apostrophe can replace a missing letter)
  * Apply spelling rules (hopping = short vowel sound, hoping = long vowel)
  * Learn by sight (look-say-cover-write-check)
  * Use a ‘mind palace’ of visual memories (recall images, colour, font)

Quick wins

To conclude, here are three ‘quick wins’ for developing pupils’ writing skills…

- Model how to write the first paragraph of an essay/evaluation/description, etc.
- Teach the essential connectives of writing such as however, because, as, so, although, while, despite, on the other hand.
- Encourage pupils to use short sentences at the start and end of paragraphs

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