

An approach to scaffolding children's non-fiction writing: the use of writing frames

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Introduction

Most teachers would agree that children should undertake a wide range of types of non-fiction writing and that they should be 'helped to plan and produce these types of writing by being given purposeful opportunities to write their own.' (D.E.S.1990.) Yet there are many questions about how this aim should be achieved and about how teachers can help children learn about the various structural demands of particular writing forms. As part of the work of the Nuffield Exeter Extending Literacy (EXEL) project we have found that the use of writing frames is one strategy which can help children use the generic structures of recounts, reports, instructions, explanations, persuasion and discussion until they become familiar enough with these written structures to have assimilated them into their independent writing repertoire.

What are writing frames?

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

How writing frames can help

The work of various educationalists and psychologists (Cairney 1990, Cudd and Roberts 1989, Bereiter and Scardamalia 1985) suggested to us that children's early attempts at non-fiction writing might successfully be scaffolded by framing structures. We worked with teachers throughout the country to evolve and trial writing frames for use in the classroom. The frames have been used with children throughout the primary and lower secondary years and across the full range of abilities, including children with special needs.

Writing frames can help children by:-

- providing experience of a range of generic structures,
- offering a structure in which the given connectives maintain the cohesive ties of the text thus helping pupils maintain the 'sense' of what they are writing,
- offering a varied vocabulary of connectives and sentence beginnings thus extending children's experience beyond the familiar 'and then',

- encouraging pupils to give a personal interpretation of the information they have gathered by the careful use of personal pronouns. It is tempting to talk about this process in terms of giving children ownership of the information they are working with,
- asking the children to select, and think about what they have learnt, by encouraging pupils to re-order information and demonstrate their understanding rather than just copying out text,
- enabling all pupils to achieve some success at writing, a vital ingredient in improving self-esteem and motivation,
- preventing pupils from being presented with a blank sheet of paper - a particularly daunting experience for some children especially those for whom sustained writing is difficult,
- giving children an overview of the writing task.

Non- fiction Genres

There are many different genres of writing, and writing can contain elements of more than one genre but our writing frames concentrate on the six main types of non-fiction genres identified by the Australian genre theorists (Christie,1989, Martin and Rothery,1986, Rothery and Callaghan,1989). The six genres they identified - recount, report, explanation, discussion, exposition (we have called this persuasion) and procedure (which we call instructions) - were arrived at after the analysis of many texts. They also discovered from analysing children's writing that much of the writing undertaken in schools was in the form of recounts with the other genres relatively neglected. Within each genre they analysed the 'typical' structure of the texts and it is this analysis of the different generic structures that has helped shape the formats of the writing frames.

The problems of writing non-fiction.

Some children appear to find non-fiction writing problematic compared to writing narrative. There are several reasons why this may be so. Some reasons have to do with the features of non-fiction texts themselves and others may stem from the model of teaching we offer our pupils.

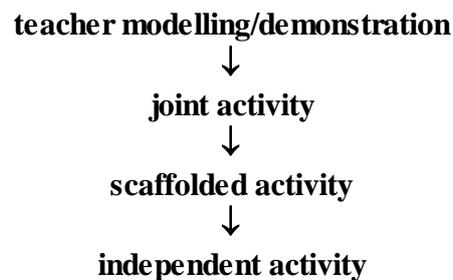
Features of non-fiction texts

Children, it is often claimed, lack experience of the different genres of non-fiction and their organisational structures (Winograd and Bridge, 1986; Littlefair, 1991). They find the linguistic features (vocabulary, connectives, cohesion, register) more difficult to comprehend and write than those of the more familiar narrative texts (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Perera, 1984; Anderson and Armbruster, 1981; Littlefair, 1991). This textual inexperience affects

children's non-fiction writing. The frames offer children support in becoming familiar with all these features.

A model for teaching

The model of teaching upon which we have based the work of the EXEL project is summarised in the following diagram.



This model arises from the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who put forward the notion that children first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners. The child is firstly a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert (parent or teacher), then a novice as he/she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the child grows in experience and capability of performing the task, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting the child at problematic points. Eventually, the child assumes full responsibility for the task with the expert still present in the role of a supportive audience. The model seems to make good theoretical sense, yet it can be a little difficult to apply it fully to teaching in a busy, over-populated classroom. In particular, it seems that children are too often expected to move into the independent writing phase before they are really ready and often the pressure to do so is based on the practical problem of teachers being unable to find the time to spend with them in individual support. What is needed is something to span the joint activity and independent activity phase.

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

How to use the frames

Use of the frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction (teacher and child/ren together) and then to the child undertaking writing supported by the frame. This oral, teacher modelling, joint construction pattern of teaching is vital for it not only models the generic form and teaches the words that signal connections and transitions but it also provides opportunities for developing children's oral language and their thinking. Some children, especially children with learning difficulties may

need many oral sessions and sessions in which their teacher acts as a scribe before they are ready to attempt their own writing.

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

When to use the frames

We are convinced that writing in a range of genres is most effective if it is located in meaningful experiences. The concept of 'situated learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991) suggests that learning is always context-dependent. For this reason, we have always used the frames within class topic work rather than in isolated study skills lessons (Lewis and Wray, 1994). British primary school teaching is still largely based on this model of curriculum planning and we would argue very strongly for its potential effectiveness.

We do not advocate using the frames for the direct teaching of generic structures in skills-centred lessons. The frame itself is never a purpose for writing.

There is much debate about the appropriateness of the direct teaching of generic forms (Barrs, 1991/2; Cairney, 1992) and we share many of the reservations expressed by such commentators. Our use of a writing frame always arose from the child having a purpose for undertaking some writing and the appropriate frame was then introduced if the child needed extra help.

When the child/ren have a purpose for writing you may decide to offer them a frame,

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

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

Using the frames with a range of writers

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

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

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

From scaffolding to independence

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

Final points to remember

- Use of a frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction and then to the child undertaking writing supported by the frame.
- Not all the children in a class will need to use a writing frame.
- The use of a writing frame should arise when a child has a purpose for undertaking some writing and the appropriate frame is introduced if the child needs extra support. The frame in itself is never a purpose for writing.
- It should be made clear to the children that the frame is just a draft and they should be encouraged to cross out, amend and add to the frame as suits them.

- Frames are only a small part of the varied and rich writing experiences we offer children. They will need wide experience of text written in a range of genres as well as opportunities to write in a variety of contexts.
- Generic structures are not rigid, unchangeable forms. It is not appropriate to teach them in this way.

Some example writing frames

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

Recount genre

Before I read about this topic I thought that

But when I read about it I learnt that

I also learnt that

Furthermore I learnt that

The final thing I learnt was that

Explanation genre

I want to explain why

There are many reasons for this. The chief reason is

Another reason is

A further reason is

So now you can see why

Persuasion genre

Some people argue that

But I want to argue that

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

Another reason is

Furthermore

Therefore, although some people argue that

I think I have shown that

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