

# Talk for Writing



Ideas to use in the classroom

Over the last year and a half to two years we have been thinking and training and eating and sleeping Talk for Writing. During the course of this work we have started to collect a number of activities that have been tried with children and teachers. We have written about these on the [blog](#), on our [website](#) and on our [YouTube](#) channel but having them in three different places is not convenient. This booklet is an attempt to bring them all together in one place.

It must be stated quite clearly that all of these ideas have been drawn from and developed after working with, Pie Corbett, who has been instrumental in training consultants in this area. It is not the intention of this booklet to reproduce activities that can be found in his books.

Jumpstart Poetry Games and Activities for ages 7 – 12 9780415467087

JumpStart Story Making Games and activities for ages 7 – 12  
9780415466868

The Bumper Book of Story Telling into Writing KS1 9780955300806

The Bumper Book of Story Telling into Writing KS2 9780955300813

So to start off with, what does Talk for Writing consist of and what are the ideas that are central to using Talk for Writing?

Talk for Writing is an externalisation of a process that writers go through. What we are aiming to do is to let children into this process but as so much of our decision making goes on in our minds and may never be recorded on paper, we need a way of showing it to children. We need to make our thought processes as writers explicit.

Talk for Writing consists of:

- Book talk
- Writer talk
- Warming up the word
- Purposeful sentence level work
- Learning and remembering texts

and some of the big ideas behind it are

- Imitate, innovate and invent
- Magpie-ing
- Name it!
- Never dodge a good word
- Keep going

There is a section in this booklet for each of the above bullet points detailing activities that can be used with children. The only one that is not covered in any detail is purposeful sentence level work. Our publication *Think Writing* looks at this area in some detail and therefore it does not seem sensible to duplicate the ideas.

All of the ideas can be used with fiction, non-fiction and poetry. and all fit into a teaching sequence which is a pattern of teaching that usually lasts for 3 to 4 weeks. For a blank version please visit the teaching sequence folder of our website [www.deseducation.org/literacy](http://www.deseducation.org/literacy) .

## Teaching and Learning Sequence

<b>Curricular target:</b>		
<b>Key learning Outcome</b>		
This should be a task or an activity which enables children to demonstrate their learning through the block of work and to apply the skills and strategies learnt appropriate to audience and purpose. This could be done individually or collaboratively. The focus for the task can easily be drawn from the objectives of the block.		
<b>All children must...</b>	<b>Most children should...</b>	<b>Some children could...</b>
Differentiated learning outcome should reflect the expectations of the curricular target	Differentiated learning outcome should reflect the expectations of the curricular target	Differentiated learning outcome should reflect the expectations of the curricular target
<b>Teaching</b>	<b>Guided Work linked to sequence</b>	<b>Learning (I can ... / I know... / I understand...)</b>
<p><b><u>Familiarisation/ Immersion in text/Analysis</u></b></p> <p>This order is not definitive and will change depending upon the text that you use and what you want to do with it. However, it is a starting point. Texts could be written, visual and/or audio.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activating prior knowledge.</li> <li>• First-hand and practical experiences in order to make connections with the text</li> <li>• Introducing text and developing meaning making (comprehension) strategies (drama or role play)</li> <li>• Book talk. Personal response to the text.(Could use drama/speaking and listening activities)</li> <li>• Writer's talk. What type of text is it, where would you find this text and who might want to read it (purpose and context, the format that it is in and possible alternatives)</li> <li>• How is this text organised?</li> <li>• Teach, practise and apply purposeful, related sentence level objectives</li> <li>• Learning and remembering texts</li> <li>• What is special about this text (language features, e.g. figurative language in poetry or narrative or the use of time and causal connectives in explanations)</li> <li>• Warming up the word and vocabulary generation</li> </ul> <p>Summarise purpose, organisation and language features in order to generate success criteria for writing. (Could be teacher or child generated)</p>	<p>Guided writing taking place at this part of the teaching sequence may be focused around talk</p>	<p>Identify key learning stages that the children will need to achieve in order to create the key outcome successfully</p>
<p><b><u>Capturing Ideas</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generating ideas to write about - this might involve real-life experiences, other curriculum areas or some other stimuli, story sequels, alternative versions or other variations</li> <li>• Working through ideas to get a clear picture – drama, talk, creating a film/video or generating short pieces of writing. Learning and remembering own text</li> <li>• Oral rehearsal and refinement – drawing on ideas from the working wall</li> <li>• Plan your own writing by applying knowledge of structures and language features of text types (success criteria)</li> </ul>		
<p><b><u>Shared Writing</u></b></p> <p>It is helpful to identify how many writing based sessions you will be teaching and identifying a clear focus for each session. Each part of the outcome will need to be modelled and will build up to form the whole.</p>	<p>Here you will need to think about which guided groups you see when. Which group would benefit most from having guided</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing focuses should be based upon success criteria, curricular target areas and assessment evidence showing where children have difficulties with writing</li> <li>• Modelling writing behaviours - oral rehearsal, cumulative rereading to cue next sentence to check for flow and continuity and to see if it sounds right, try alternatives</li> <li>• Modelling spelling strategies suitable at the point of writing</li> <li>• Modelling the writing process - drafting, proof-reading, editing</li> <li>• Be clear about the teaching strategy for modelling writing: demonstration, joint construction and supported composition</li> <li>• Plan time to review and evaluate writing against success criteria</li> </ul>	<p>work when writing the opening etc.</p>	
<p><b><u>Scaffolding Independent writing</u></b></p>		

## Book Talk

***‘Not occasionally, but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.’***

***Barthes as quoted in Book Talk by Aiden Chambers, p128***

We have probably been doing something very similar to book talk for quite a while and so this aspect will seem familiar. However, I think that it can be one of the more challenging elements of Talk for Writing.

What we are aiming to do in book talk is give a personal response to the text and show the children how we go about problem-solving the meaning that it has for us. We need to dig a bit deeper and ask what made us think that, and then ask does anyone have any other ideas?

When working with non-fiction texts we can undertake book talk with two different purposes as there are two ways in which we can read non-fiction.

The first way is probably the method most commonly used and that is to search for a specific piece of information, e.g what type of armour did the Romans have? Our book talk will go through the process of navigating the text to find the information and then show the sense that we make of it once found.

The second method of book talk for non-fiction is more like the way in which we read fiction and that is reading the non-fiction book from cover to cover for pleasure or flicking through it looking at the pictures and delving a little more deeply when something catches our interest. In fact this is the way many people read non-fiction. We must therefore ensure that we model both ways of reading non-fiction and the type of book talk that each way demands, not on the same text but on different texts in different units of work.

## Activities

- Discussion in pairs, small groups and whole class focusing around areas of interest to the children
- Use of Aiden Chambers likes, dislikes, patterns and puzzles. For older children notes could be made on a chart under each heading. This

could be used by children collecting under all headings or ¼ of the class could jot down things under one of the headings so the class covers all 4.

- Use of Aiden Chambers 'Tell Me' framework: have you ever read anything else like this? Which character interested you most? Who was telling this text? Does it matter? Has anything like this ever happened to you? Did you feel the same as the people in the story? Having listened to everything that has been said, did anything surprise you? When you think of this text now after all that we have said, what is the most important thing about it for you?
- Drawing a 'response to the text' chart. For fiction this will have a continuum along one axis that relates to the text, e.g. scared and brave, worried to relaxed and time along the second axis. The feelings can then be plotted as the book is read giving highs and lows to discuss at particular points.

## Writer Talk

Writer talk occurs in two different sections of the teaching sequence. The first time it happens is in the immersion phase where we respond to the text that we are using by linking back to what we thought about it and asking 'so how did the writer do that?' Writer talk also occurs in the shared writing part of the teaching sequence when actually writing. It is the first instance that we shall consider here.

The purpose of writer talk is to read as a writer, thinking about our response as a reader and then understanding how the author evoked that response. It is not a naming or spotting of parts, e.g. adverbial phrase, but more a discussion about the function of those parts in this text and their reason for being used. All the time it is linked to the reader's response.

'When I read this part I started to get a little worried about the girl and what might happen to her. So what did the author do to make me feel like that?' It might be vocabulary choice, it might be the length of the sentence, it might be the information at the beginning of a sentence, it might be the patterning of the text, it could be a whole host of things. Talk about what they are and collect them for display on the working wall. Ultimately these ideas go to create the success criteria for the children's own writing.

Some texts will lend themselves to key questions purely because of the way they are written or structured. For example one of the key questions for *Think of an Eel* by Karen Wallace and Mike Bostock must be - how are the two types of writing/voices different? Once the children have identified some reasons they can interrogate the text to see if they can find more examples of that technique or device and most importantly consider their effect.

## Warming up the Word.

**'Words give everybody wings.'**

Aristophanes

Warming up the word is an umbrella term for four different types of activity each with a unique purpose.

- Generating vocabulary
- Usual words in unusual combinations
- Extending an idea
- Visualising or imaging

All of these activities should be done under time constraints. Ted Hughes explains why so clearly in Poetry in the Making.

***'...it should be short and sharp and create a crisis which arouses the brain's resources. The compulsion towards haste overthrows the ordinary precautions, flings everything into top gear and many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open. Barriers break down, prisoners break out of their cells.'***

### **Generating Vocabulary or playing around with words**

It is well known that we have an active and passive vocabulary, or as the Anglo-Saxon poets called it, wordhoard. The active wordhoard is the bank of words that we use in our spoken language and the passive wordhoard is the group of words that we know but don't use. What we want to do with children is to tap into the words and phrases that they have heard in texts, be it from books or video, or from those people with a much greater spoken vocabulary, and bring them into the active wordhoard.

***'keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words.'***

Ted Hughes

For this type of activity, images are very important.

- Using an image for what is about to be written, children look at it for 2 minutes and then have 5 minutes to jot down as many words and phrases as they can think of. If the image is shown using interactive whiteboard software the teacher can then take the children on a tour of the image using the spotlight or magnifying tool asking questions such as how would you describe the shape of the tail feathers?, what words would you use to describe the markings on the wing feathers? How do the under and outer wings differ? Could you use a simile to describe the beak? The point is for the teacher to suggest ways in which the object/person could be described without giving the children the words. The children then have another 5 minutes to jot down the new words and phrases that they have generated. If you are reading this online you can see an example for a non-chronological report about eagles.

- This activity can then be followed up with the use of a zone of relevance. This looks like a target or bulls eye. Decide upon the text type that the words and phrases will be used for, e.g. a non-chronological report about eagles. Sort through the children's words and phrases placing those most suitable in the centre of the target, moving further out as they become more and more unsuitable for that text type. It is important here to be clear that you are placing them in a certain position because they are not suitable for that text type not that they are no good. Use the same words and phrases but do the same for a description of an eagle in a poem or story. Do the words and phrases stay in the same place or move?
- Anonyms or aptonyms are great fun. This is where a person's name suits their work, e.g. Mr Tooth the Dentist. In fact there are many real ones William Wordsworth the poet, Sally Ride the astronaut. Draw up a list of professions with the children and then start to generate names. What can you come up with for teacher?

### Usual Words in Unusual Combinations

The purpose of these types of activities is that it is often not the biggest, fanciest words that are the best but the normal words put together in different ways.

- Again images can be very supportive. Share on the IWB an image you want to describe. Underneath it have 3 lists of words that you have generated that you can see in the image. Also identify what you might describe in the image (nouns). In any order pick a word from each column and put them together to describe one of the nouns. Some of these ideas will work and many won't. Record those that do! Again, if you are online you can see this example here. The importance of verbally trying out combinations and editing them is important here.
- [Thriller Whizz](#) is another way to do the same activity
- The above activity should be used for a few times with the words already generated but then you can move on to the children also generating the words in the columns.
- A different way of doing the same activity is to write the words on bits of paper and then take a lucky dip choice, one from each of the 3 piles.
- [Found poetry](#) is a great way to create new combinations of words and phrases from another author or authors. Take a text and copy out words and phrases that you like from it onto pieces of paper. Then select some and try them out in different combinations to create a poem. The trick here is to say the poem that you are creating over and over again so that the language is rolled over the tongue and the language and its patterns are heard and embedded. Don't write the poems out. Just add them to on the working wall using the pieces of paper. This is a very powerful activity.
- Kennings are a wonderful way of creating new combinations. They are a way of describing things, introduced to us by the Vikings on their many visits to this country. Instead of using the noun 'sword' they

would call it a heart-eater, skin-slicer etc. Take several nouns that you are going to include in your writing and generate kennings for them.

## Expanding Ideas

This is a key skill in a writer: being able to take the seed of an idea and make it grow. Children are naturally able to do this if you watch their play. However, when it comes to transferring this into words that can be written, it becomes more complex.

- The most powerful activity that we use for this is Tell Me More, introduced to us by Chris Smith the story teller. The game can be played in fiction and non-fiction but has different demands in each.
- In fiction, take the setting or a character or an event from the story and work with a partner. Start off with a statement, e.g. tell me more about the river. The other person responds with an interesting fact or and then has to dig deeper for more and more details. When they run out of ideas the other person asks again tell me more...and offers a prompt e.g. about the depth of the water, about the sound of the ripples etc.
- The game is played in exactly the same way for non-fiction but the talk this time needs to be based on information to be included in the text. If writing about a blackbird the partner says tell me more about its appearance, what it eats, where it lives and the other person responds. Where you find you have nothing to say jot that down because this will be an area where you need to go and find out more information before you start to write.
- 10 uses for ..... a plastic bag, the cottage in the woods. Generate ideas for whatever you want to write about.

## Visualising or Imaging

Writers can hold an image in their head and find the words to describe it for their reader. This is one of the reasons that we use images so much to support writing. However, the end point is that the image used is not a photograph but created in the writer's head. Pie Corbett calls this doing the 'mad, stary thing.' Ted Hughes in Poetry in the making says

***'by looking at the place in my memory very hard and very carefully and by using words that grow naturally out of pictures and feelings, I capture it.'***

This skill was made very clear to me when one of my colleagues who is a writer explained that when she saw things that caught her attention she would try and find words to describe the event if she wrote it down. Those of us who

do not consider ourselves to be writers would respond to the event in different ways.

- Ask the children to create an image in their heads and to look at it closely and then jot down as many words as possible about it. Then take the children for a walk around the image evoking the senses, name what they might see in the foreground, all around them, in the distance; what they might hear or feel; what they might be feeling inside, that someone or something might be there with them etc. Now give the children 2 or 3 more minutes to jot the words and phrases down. They should be able to add many more to their original image.
- Play a very short clip from a film and ask the children to imagine what happens next. Keep that moving image in their head but again direct them with attention to the senses and an awareness of everything in the image. Jot down words and phrases that come to mind to describe the images.

## Learning and Remembering Texts

***'All texts are woven from the tissues of other texts, whether their authors know it or not.'***

David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*

- Imitation – learning and remembering a text
- Innovation – using a learnt text
- Invention – drawing on all that you know to create your own text



Feedback from teachers tells us that this has proved to be one of the strategies that has had the most impact on children's writing. We all use the phrase, 'if you can't say it you can't write it.' Learning and remembering texts is the way in which we can help children say the text and know the general idea of the text before they start to write. When they sit down to write they can focus upon the best way to express what they want to say.

Learning and remembering texts is a multisensory method of teaching children stories so that they know them off by heart. This results in both structure and language patterns becoming embedded or internalised. The writer can then readily draw upon them to create new texts.

The multisensory approach includes kinaesthetic actions to help support the memory for parts of the text and a visual text map to support retelling.

The actions must not get in the way of retelling – use just enough at significant points to aid the memory. .. Learning for structure and learning for language will free up writers to be creative.

In his books *The Bumper Book of Storytelling KS1 and KS2*, Pie gives some examples of actions that can be used for particular words such as who, when, because.

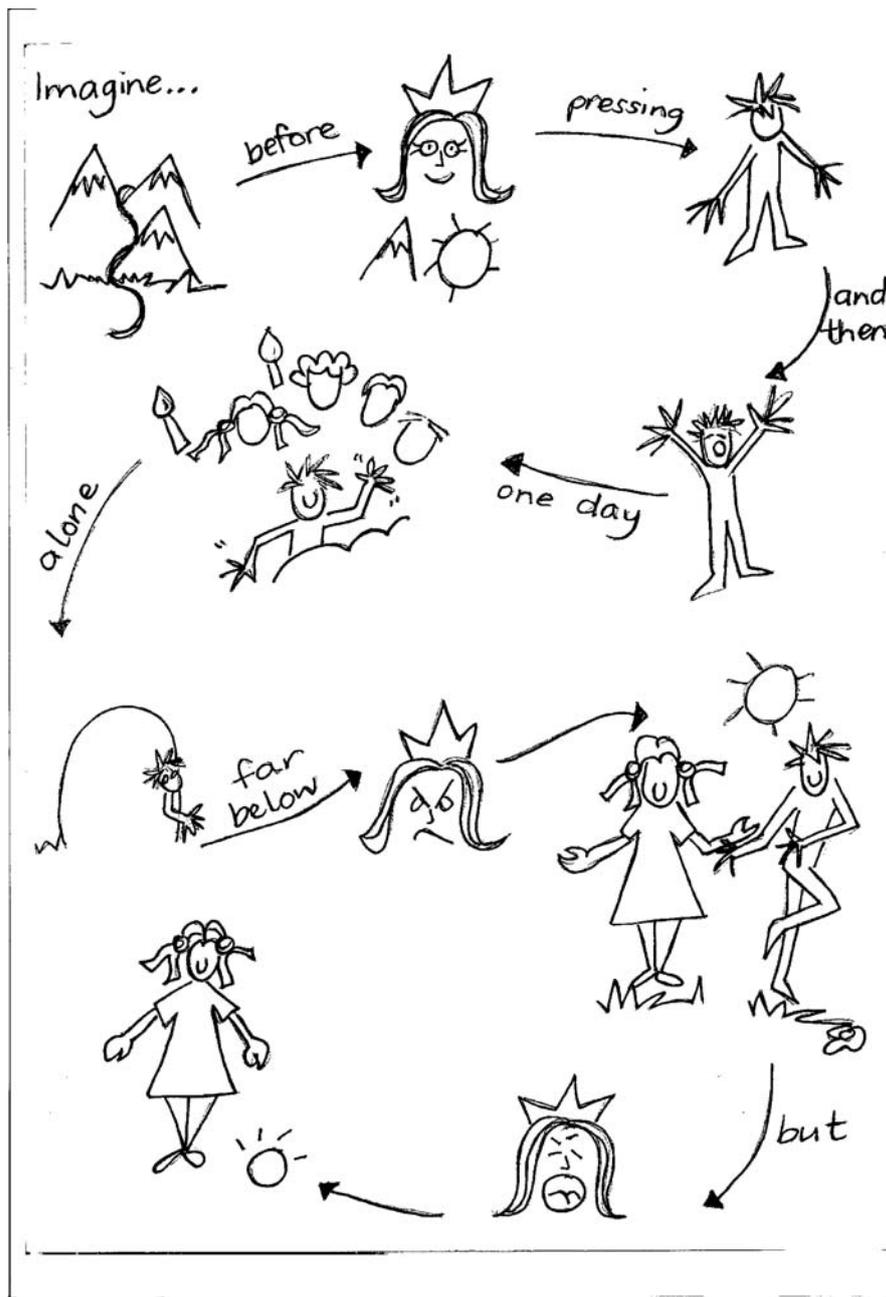
We have Chris Smith once again to thank for providing the structure for learning and remembering texts and that is HMSS.

Hear it  
Map it  
Step it  
Say it

In the 'hear it' section, the teacher tells the story, or the bare bones of the story with actions and the children watch. You will need to have drawn a map to have beside you as an aid to memory but you will need to spend time memorising the words. Pie Corbett records one sentence at a time on tape, leaving a gap just long enough to repeat each sentence in between. Long car journeys give him the opportunity to learn and remember his texts. If the story has repetitive patterns in it the children are usually joining in before the end is reached.

The story can then be retold a second time but this time with attention being drawn to the map so that the visual cues are linked to the actions and the retelling. Children always join in this time round.

Below is an example of a story map for *Blue John* by Berlie Doherty. Story maps are very personal scaffolds and each storyteller needs to draw their own.



The text then needs to be told many times over the next few days as a class, in groups and then in pairs until all children can retell it. You may want to record it on Dictaphones or using audacity so that children can go and listen to it on their own. Each time it is retold you

as a teacher need to step back out of the retelling slightly – just say the start of sentences, only do the actions, only add an action when the children become a little unsure until you are doing nothing. If the children are retelling with others they can use the group, the map and the actions to prompt them if they find parts difficult to remember.

The next stage is to step the text. This is a means of chunking up the text. Here you physically take a step every time you start a new chunk. The chunks might be sentences for younger children and paragraphs for older children. And now children can be challenged to tell the story in a variety of ways all with stepping. How about just the actions, add sound effects for each chunk and tell with those, do this standing side by side, facing each other or following each other. By now the children should know the bare bones of the text really well and are saying themselves. This is known as **imitation** and

some children may linger at this phase. This stage of learning and remembering occurs in the familiarisation part of the teaching sequence.

Children do not have to learn the whole of a text if what they need to develop is the language. If this is the case, learning a small part of the text that has some of the features that you want the children to use would be more appropriate.

The actions can become the major part of retelling where the children are acting out or freeze-framing the main events to retell. Digital photos can be taken of these and used as prompts for the retelling.

In the capturing ideas part of the teaching sequence, children will be ready to move into the **innovate** stage. This is where they start to experiment and change aspects of the text. This could be as small as altering the name of the characters to changing the setting, to adding another character to telling the setting from another point of view, or in non-fiction, changing the content completely. At this stage children will need to draw a map of their own text and retell it several times. During this retelling we can help children develop the language patterns necessary for the text they are telling. They are now ready to write!

**Inventing** stories and non-fiction texts needs to start as soon as children start school. This is an oral activity and may not lead to a written outcome at all. Using props, children talk about stories that they know that have that item or character in and then start to create their own story. The teacher needs to model this process and to support the children using story language and engaging the listener. There are a variety of ways in which children can be supported to invent stories

- Props
- Mind-maps that have characters, setting, problem and resolution, theme etc on that children can select from to invent with
- These ideas from the mind-map can be put into jars and one from each can be drawn and used
- Children can bring in favourite toys that they would like to use to create a story with
- Linking the germ of an idea to a blueprint to create the bare bones which can then be built on.

Inventing needs to happen regularly throughout a child's time at school. For a detailed non-fiction inventing session see [here](#).

***'In other words, anything you write is connected to other written things.'***  
Thomas C. Foster, How to Read Literature Like a Professor



## Magpie-ing

***'Good artists copy; great artists steal.'***

Picasso

This is one of the key strategies that is part of the ethos of a writing classroom. We need to borrow and store words, phrases and ideas that other writers have used that we really like. We can then use them in our own writing. Strategies used to develop this approach are varied, many teachers developing their own. Whichever way is used, the children will need to see the collecting and using being modelled regularly across the curriculum.

- Collect on the working wall. Have a picture of a magpie in the collecting area. Children can add to this collection.
- Swag books. These are little books in which children record words, phrases and ideas that they like and then use at a later date.

## Keep Going

Pie suggests that first ideas are not usually the best and that we need to keep going to release more ideas. To do this, rather than give a value judgement about what has been offered he says, 'keep going,' until lots of suggestions have been offered. You can then pick up on the one that you want and say why. This is very closely linked to Name it!

## Name it!

Children do not necessarily have well-developed word classes and may not know the names of trees, breeds, species etc. Rottweiler says so much more than dog, and poodle has a whole other connotation. When children make suggestions that are general nouns, e.g. dinosaurs, butterflies, cars we say 'Can you name one?', and then take an example from that explaining why.

This also makes a great game to play where a noun is given, e.g. cars, chairs etc and the children then call out as many specific names as possible.

**If you have tried some of these strategies, do let us know what impact they have had on the children's attitudes to writing and what they write.**

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### **Images**

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Dave the Tame Magpie by cats2007