

Helping Your Child to Write



What is writing?

Writing is a basic skill that we want all children to leave Hyde Primary School with. Our aim is for them to be able to write in a variety of situations, for a variety of purposes and for a range of different audiences. Writing is used in a variety of ways, including providing a way of communication between people who are in different places, a way of recording events and ideas so they are not forgotten and a way of entertaining people. It can take the form of a quickly scribbled (and possibly illegible!) note or a beautifully written manuscript. It can vary in length from a letter to a thousand page story or information book.

Writing can be for a large audience or for nobody except the writer. It is even possible to write in codes where it is impossible to find out what has been written without a key.

To be able to write children need to have a range of knowledge. They need to know that writing is made up of letters that have been combined to make words and how to arrange these words into sentences that make sense. They need to know the pattern of movements that make up each letter. They need to understand about punctuation, ranging from capital letters, full stops and finger spaces to speech marks to semi colons and apostrophes. It is also useful if children understand the language that is used to describe writing. This is called the “meta language” of writing and means that children can discuss their writing with others using common terms (for example, adjectives, complex sentences, connectives). These aspects of writing are usually referred to as the “transcriptional” elements of writing.

However, children also need to understand the “compositional” elements of writing. This is how texts are structured, the features they need for each type of writing they do and how to make their texts interesting. They also need to understand grammar, including different word classes, and how to use this to construct different types of sentences for different purposes and change sentences for effect. Writing is more than the process of recording – it is about the creative processes involved in recording different ideas, making your writing interesting and imaginative and engaging the reader. A piece of writing can be beautifully presented and technically accurate but so boring you can't finish it; equally it could be incredibly difficult to decode but full of interesting ideas. The aim of teaching writing at Hyde is for children to be able to write pieces that combine the best of transcriptional and compositional features of writing.

Stages of Writing

As children's writing develops they will go through several different stages. Children pass through these at different ages and different speeds – a child might get “stuck” in one developmental stage and consolidate their skills for a long time before moving quickly through the next two stages. It is also possible that they will include elements from a more advanced stage in their writing from an early age. All children are unique, and their writing development is subsequently unique too.

However, the broad stages of early writing are:

1. **Drawing** – before children begin to write they start to draw pictures. These pictures might not be recognisable to you, but they mean something to your child. Your child is beginning to learn that they can record their ideas, thoughts and feelings using shapes and lines.

What you can do: Talk to your child about their picture. I try not to assume I know what they have drawn and instead ask them to “Tell me about your picture” – this way I avoid thinking that they have drawn a house when actually it is a picture of a person! You could also write down what they tell you about their picture (this could be on their picture or on a post it note if they don't want you to write on their drawing) to show them how we use writing to help us understand/remember.

2. **Emergent writing (shapes)** – otherwise known as “scribble”! This is where children imitate writing. They might use lines, circles or squiggles. It will be unintelligible to anyone else, but they will be very proud of their “writing”.

What you can do: Praise their efforts at writing – they are copying writing behaviours and beginning to understand that writing is different to pictures. Encourage your child to “write” you notes, shopping lists and letters so that they begin to understand the relevance of writing in day-to-day life. Point out examples of writing in the environment.

3. **Emergent writing (random letters)** – children start to copy letter shapes from the environment, usually letters they see around them a lot, like the letters in their name. They are beginning to understand that “writing” is more than lines and circles and that other people can read what you write, although this might not be possible with their writing.

What you can do: Ask your child to read you their writing. This shows them that you know they are writing and that you value what they have achieved. Help them to form the letters in their name correctly and praise their attempts at name writing. Point out places in the environment where they see the letters in their names.

4. **Semi-phonetic** – this is the stage that children begin to link letters and sounds in their writing and where you can start to decode some words (usually words they have seen a lot in the environment or words that have special meaning for them). Large parts of their writing may still be unintelligible.

What you can do: Continue to praise their attempts at writing and talk to them about what they have written. Read the words you can decode and let them read you the rest. Give them lots of opportunities to see you writing and to write for you. You can also start to help them with the correspondence between letters and sounds: I need to write “dog food”. I need to write a d first – round the dinosaur’s bottom, up his long neck and down to his feet.

5. **Phonetic writing** – their writing will be heavily reliant on their knowledge of phonics and their spelling will also be related to how they speak. Key words that can’t be sounded out will be written based on their sight memory of the shape of the word or the letters in the word – for example “the” might be written “jnc”. Children tend to write the initial and end sounds in this stage, ignoring the medial (middle) sounds.

What you can do: Read their writing! Children get the enthusiasm for writing from those around them – if they receive lots of praise they will write more because they know that it makes you happy. Talk to them about words that can’t be sounded out and show them how you write them in your writing. I wouldn’t “correct” their spelling at this stage as this might make them lose enthusiasm – children like to be “right” – but they do need to be shown the correct way to spell tricky words, so talk to them as you are writing: “This is a tricky word. I can’t sound it out but I need to remember the letters...”

6. **Transitional spelling** – this is where children begin to use their knowledge of high frequency words to spell correctly (for example the, there, to), although they are still heavily reliant on writing down the sounds in words. At this stage, anyone who knows the relationship between letters and sounds should be able to decode the majority of your child’s writing. They will be writing down the letter sound correspondences that they know, although they might not be choosing the correct option (for example writing “rain” using the “ay” long a sound. Children also start to use finger spaces and punctuation (full stops and capital letters).

What you can do: Show them what a good writer they are by reading without their help – you will soon recognise the way that your child writes words they don’t know the sound for. Keep praising their attempts. When your child is reading, point out the different ways of making different phonemes. Have a treasure hunt through their story books for words that have different ways of making each of the long vowel sounds.

7. **Conventional spelling** – at this stage children are using conventional spelling for the majority of words, although they will still use their knowledge of phonics for longer words that are new to them. They use capital letters, full stops and finger spaces consistently and are beginning to use other forms of punctuation (for example speech marks, questions marks, exclamation marks).

What you can do: Encourage them to write! Children need to see that writing has a purpose in the world – get them to write your shopping lists, letters to friends and relatives telling them their news, diary entries in a special scrap book. Children will be more likely to write if they can see you writing, so if you do ask them to write diary entries or letters make sure that they can see that you are doing it too – writing should be fun and exciting; you could even try writing stories or poems together (and remember, part of the writing process is the compositional aspects, so your child doesn't need to be physically "writing" to be writing!)

Purpose and Audience

These are crucial to helping your child to write. Your child needs to know **why** they are writing (the purpose) and **who** they are writing for (the audience). If these things are clear to them they will be more likely to write. If they don't understand the purpose or audience they will quite possibly refuse to write – after all they have more important things to do like playing!

There are generally considered to be 5 purposes for writing: to entertain, to inform, to persuade, to discuss, to explain. Purposes should be as real as possible to help children to become confident and motivated writers.

The audience could be you, their grandparents, friends, themselves, the staff at school, the tooth fairy, Father Christmas, even their local councillor if they are fired up about an issue! It is better to have a "real" audience than a fabricated one as this means that they might get a response, although sometimes this will take a bit of effort.

Handwriting

Handwriting is one of the transcriptional elements of writing. Children are taught letter formation at Hyde School following the Nelson scheme. We have a set "patter" that we use to remind children of the correct formation, which is included at the back of this booklet. In Class 1 we teach letter formation with the first set of letter sounds in our phonic work and then develop this through structured handwriting teaching. The sequence of letters taught is also included at the back of this booklet. However, the process of handwriting does not start with letter formation. Instead handwriting begins with gross motor skills and large body movements, particularly focussing on the ability to control the shoulder pivot (similar to painting a fence or a wall). It is therefore important to provide lots of practice with pivoting movements at school and at home. A selection of possible activities is provided at the back of the booklet. It is also important to reinforce letter formation in a variety of different media (paint, water, chalk, pastel, pencil), sizes (giant, middle sized, tiny) and on different surfaces (sand, soil, paper...) to enable children to develop a true sense of the different letter shapes.

Wanting to Write

One of the biggest concerns about children, particularly boys, is that they don't want to write. This is usually because they do not see the need to communicate in writing when they can talk to someone, or because they do not realise the purpose of their writing. It helps children to see the relevance of writing if they see you write every day and if they are provided with lots of real world writing experiences that have a real sense of purpose (for example, writing birthday and Christmas lists, captioning their pictures and models, writing emails or letters to friends and relatives). Writing does not have to be done at home in the same way as it is done at school, and it does not have to be perfect every time – remember, children are learning all the time and every time they write they have a lot of different things to remember so it is usual for them to forget some of them. Particularly in Key Stage One and Reception it is more important that they are writing than that it is perfect: we will help them with perfect writing at school; your role is to praise their efforts, gently remind them about things they find difficult and provide purposes and good role models for writing.

The relationship between reading and writing – reading as a writer and writing as a reader

Reading and writing are inter-related. A good reader will read a variety of texts and “magpie” – or borrow – words and phrases that they can use in their own writing. This is why readers who read a variety of texts, who read every night and who love books often make the best writers. Similarly, a good writer will think about who the audience for their work is and the purpose of their writing and adapt their use of language appropriately, using as a model the texts they have read (for example, the language is different in a story book to an information book, and the layout is different in an explanation text to an instructional text). It is therefore vital that children have a wide variety of texts shared with them and that they read a broad and balanced reading diet to enable them to become the best writer they can be.

Ideas of things to write about

Here are a few suggestions for activities you and your child can do:

- Keep a shared diary where you both contribute with pictures, writing and photographs
- Add handwritten messages to Christmas, birthday and thank you cards
- Write letters, emails and postcards to friends and relatives – you could even find a pen pal!
- Be a reporter and write a newspaper report about important events
- Write captions for paintings, pictures and models, so that you will remember where you were, what you were doing and when you did it
- Make your own recipe book, making copies of your favourite recipes – you could ask all the members of the family to contribute!
- Write stories together, taking turns to be the scribe for the ideas
- Make posters to advertise events you are going to, or to remind you to do things – you could leave these displayed around the house and refer to them when you need to
- Write instructions for how to look after your pets/car/house when you go on holiday, or how to rebuild your favourite model
- Play with words and write songs and poems. You could use known examples as ideas or start with entirely new ideas.

Shared writing – writing together

Writing does not have to be a solitary activity – it can be an enjoyable thing to do together. At school, we use shared writing to introduce new ideas and consolidate skills. This is when an adult and a group of children work together to contribute ideas to a piece of writing that is scribed (written) by the adult, who models good writing behaviour (“I’m starting a new sentence, so I need a capital letter... Now I need a finger space... I’ve got to the end of the sentence so I need a full stop...” and so on). As the children get more experienced with the transcriptional elements of writing the role of scribe passes on to the child and the adult’s role changes to helping children to compose their sentences in interesting ways. Creating shared texts is a great way to help your child develop their compositional skills at home.

Writing materials

Writing can be done just about anywhere with just about anything. Children can write with sticks in mud or sand, with chalk on paper or tarmac, with paint, with pens and paper, with water squirted from washing up liquid bottles onto a wall... They need to have experience with a range of writing equipment and sizes of both writing implement and surface to write on. Children also love “special” writing equipment – things they can only use for special occasions, or a special pen that is used for story writing. Children love pencil cases and pencil tins to hold their writing and drawing things in, and folders and notebooks for their writing to be kept in. All of these things can be used to encourage your child to write. However, they can also write on newspaper, the back of junk mail that has come through the door and old envelopes.

Punctuation

Punctuation allows us to read texts accurately. It ensures that words are split up on the page and that we know where one sentence ends and another begins when we are reading. During their time in Class One children will become familiar with finger spaces, full stops and capital letters. These are the first pieces of punctuation that children need as writers. We also introduce children to question marks and exclamation marks, and begin to talk about speech marks and commas. To ensure that children understand the purpose of punctuation we teach it through our modelling of different texts – it is not taught independently (for example, we will teach speech marks in the context of stories, rather than through exercises punctuating sentences).

Computers and writing

When people talk about writing they are mainly talking about writing by hand and focussing on the transcriptional elements of the writing process. These are admittedly very important. However using computers is a motivating experience for children and can enable them to develop their knowledge of compositional elements of writing through using computer programs but also through manipulating text on the page. If your child is reluctant to write by hand at home try encouraging them to send emails to relatives, or to use one of the websites listed below to develop their understanding of transcriptional features of writing. In this way they are developing their knowledge and skills whilst engaging in a motivating activity that they want to complete. If your child does begin to use the computer to write they should also begin to develop their typing skills (try Dance Mat Typing on the BBC Schools website). It is important to remember that although computers are highly motivating and part of the modern world that we are preparing children for they will need to continue to develop their handwriting so that they can communicate in a variety of forms.

Dance Mat Typing - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing/>

A selection of writing activities to develop skills -

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/starship/english/index.shtml>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/magickey/adventures/index.shtml>

Don't forget to use the word processing program on your computer too!

Dos and Don'ts

DO:

- Praise your child for their writing
- Take an interest in what they are writing
- Show them you writing in "real" life
- Ask them to help you with your writing (for example, birthday cards and shopping lists)
- Give them a purpose and an audience for their writing
- Show them how to improve their writing when you are doing your writing – "I need a full stop here".

DON'T:

- Correct everything they do
- Try to make them write for no reason

Grammar (including definitions)

An understanding of grammar is important to children so that they develop an understanding of how sentences are structured. In Class One we introduce basic grammatical terms which are then developed as the children move up through the school. It is important that as well as using the correct grammar when they write children are using – and being exposed to – the correct grammar when they speak: after all writing in its simplest form is speech written down.

Noun – the subject or object of a verb (eg The boy ran)

Adjective – words which modify nouns (eg big dinosaur) or complement (add more information to) verbs (the dinosaur is big)

Verb – a word with a tense (eg like/liked; sit/sat)

Prefix – a group of letters added to the beginning of a word to change it into another word

Suffix – a group of letters added to the end of a word to change it into another word

Pronoun – a word that is used instead of a noun (eg me, him, she)

Plural – more than one of a noun (boys, foxes, apples)

Singular – a noun of which there is only one

Root word – a word that does not contain any smaller root words, prefixes or suffixes

Compound words – a word made up of two separate words

Word – a unit of grammar, usually separated by word spaces

Sentence – a group of words that makes sense because of grammatical links

Tense – the choice between present and past (English has no future tense)

Adverbs – words which modify the meaning of verbs, or any other word class except nouns (eg The girl stood up quickly)

Definitions from the English curriculum 2014

Sequence of Letters for Handwriting – Lower Case:

Curly Caterpillars:

c, o, a, g, d, e, q, s

Long Ladders:

l, i, j, t, u

One Armed Robots:

b, h, k, r, m, n, p

Zig Zags:

v, w, x, y, z

On its own:

f

Sequence of Letters for Handwriting – Capital Letters:

Curly Caterpillars:

C, G, O, Q, S

One Armed Robots:

B, D, J, P, R

Straight Line Letters:

E, F, H, I, K, L, T

Zig Zags:

V, W, X, Z, A, M, N, Y

On its own:

U

Activities To Develop Early Handwriting Skills:

- Painting the fence using a big paint brush and water
- Painting pictures standing up, either at an easel or on a piece of paper stuck to the wall/fence with masking tape
- Kneading play dough, pushing down hard onto the table
- Using lacing and threading cards
- Threading beads onto a string to make jewellery
- Banging shapes into a shape sorter using a hammer
- Finger painting whilst standing up or lying down
- Folding sheets and towels, shaking them vigorously up and down first
- Aiming balls at targets, both on the floor and in the air (eg a hoop held up as a goal)
- Use a sheet or towel as a trampoline for your child's teddy bear. This activity needs at least two people, one on each side of the sheet or towel. Put the teddy in the middle of the fabric and bounce them up and down – how high can you make him go? How many times can you bounce them before they fall on the floor?
- Hang up washing using pegs and a washing line where they have to stretch a little
- Simon says using activities that require your child to bend and stretch, particularly their arms over and above their head
- Walking, sitting, running, kicking, cycling will all help children develop the muscle control necessary for a good degree of control when they are handwriting
- Use a pincer grip (between your thumb and fore finger) to transfer peas/rice/pasta shapes from one bowl to another – who can do more in a minute? How fast can you empty the bowl?