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Creative writers – a workshop approach: Castle View Primary School

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Brief description

All pupils in the school enjoy writing and are helped to become good at it by consistently effective teaching. Over time, the school has developed an imaginative approach that succeeds well with all its pupils. At its centre, is the use of what the school calls 'writing workshops'. The result is outstanding progress in English for the pupils.

Overview – the school's message

'No one single happening has prompted the approach that we have to teaching writing. Our approach has evolved over a number of years and continues to do so. We believe strongly in the ways in which we teach writing, and staff new to the school readily sign up to our methods when they see the impact it has on pupils. The consistency of learning and teaching throughout school is significant. The learning environment is very important. Teaching areas have quality displays and 'working walls' to support pupils' writing. All classes have English writing lessons at least four times a week and have at least one extended writing session. Writing lessons have the same format and the same workshop approach. Training both for teachers and classroom assistants has been a significant element. Whole staff training has meant that the staff hear the same messages directly from key national speakers. We have taken the best ideas from all these people, adding many of our own ideas to develop our approach. The idea of a writing workshop has grown from our continued focus on marking and assessment for learning. It seems, to us to be the fastest, most supportive and efficient way of improving children's work.'

Ian Worthington, headteacher

The good practice in detail

Attainment on entry to the school is very low. However, progress is [outstanding](#); for example, every single pupil has made at least the expected two levels of progress between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 over the past three years. As a result, standards at the end of

Key Stage 2 are above average in English. Every pupil has achieved at least the national benchmark of Level 4 over the past three years and two thirds of pupils reached the higher Level 5 in 2010. Boys make even better progress than girls.

Among its many achievements, the school is remarkably successful with writing. This can be seen first of all in the unusually positive attitudes that pupils have towards writing. All claim to enjoy writing. Indeed, a large number of the older pupils write for themselves at home. One pupil shared her home-writing books. These comprised two beautifully illustrated exercise books (clearly influenced by her earlier study of *The Jolly Postman*, with lots of inserts and cleverly hidden notes) containing a vast range of work; chiefly stories but also poems, lists of words, lists of favourite reading, and other texts such as the design of a passport. Also, an example of an English lesson plan, expertly imitating her teacher's approach even down to learning objectives, warm-up games, an outline plan and marking criteria!

The school manages to persuade all pupils that they are writers and to behave like writers. One teacher said: 'We believe that all the pupils can be good writers and pupils are certainly confident in their own writing ability.' Pupils talk about the way that teachers 'give you just enough help with writing but not too much, leaving you free to think of your own ideas'. One simple but effective strategy is the school's use of high-quality hard-back writing books. These have high status in the school. They are not provided for younger pupils and, as a result, become something that these children eagerly anticipate as they get older! The books have the appearance of a professional writer's rough book. They contain all a pupil's writing in English, including first ideas, plans and final pieces. Pupils are encouraged to look through their book for ideas or to reflect on the progress that they have made.

All teachers also employ the notion of a writer's 'toolkit', which is designed by each teacher to support a particular writing task and is shared with pupils. This lists aspects of writing that pupils might try to incorporate in that task. One teacher said: 'We say to pupils that this is



how writers work. This is one of their tricks. And then they're really keen to have a go.' Another interesting feature is the use in all classrooms of a 'working wall'. This includes guidance from the teacher, word lists, examples of first sentences, drafts of openers and so on. The wall gets added to as new guidance is posted on top of old but previous work and hints can soon be recovered. Pupils say that they find this really helpful and it is constantly referred to during lessons.

Teachers work hard to make the writing purposeful. This is especially evident in the Early Years Foundation Stage where pupils write menus for the café role-play area, design signs for the tea party, compose letters after visits and frequently write spontaneously to other teachers. Older pupils build on this by writing: programmes for the school play; letters to the Enterprise team after a visit; posters about the danger of fireworks, which are displayed in the local community in November; and letters to pen-pals in another school.

Writing workshops

However, more than anything, at the heart of the school's success with writing is its approach to teaching through writing 'workshops'. The subject leader has produced detailed guidance for staff on teaching writing and this includes how to conduct a writing workshop. Broadly, the strategy involves a great deal of writing and modelling by the teacher, with

planning integrated at all stages. It is a step-by-step approach with pupils and teachers working together on constructing a piece of writing. In each lesson the pupils work through a series of exercises before moving to a longer piece which is sharply focused on specific criteria. The pupils' work, with its crossings-out and additions, shows how well these pupils operate as real writers, constantly looking to re-write and improve.

The workshop approach to writing in the school has also developed teachers' own confidence as writers. As a result, they tend to write their own texts for lessons rather than searching the internet for examples that might not suit their particular purposes. Among a batch of examples provided by one teacher were the following:

‘Because it was such a pleasant warm day, Jane and her parents had decided to take their brand-new, leather-furnished, automatically- controlled, convertible Lamborghini out for a spin in the countryside.’

‘I think that the people of Thornton should not rely on Jack and Jill to fetch the crucial pail of water every day. Firstly, it is important to consider the fact that they are extremely young and therefore barely developed physically to carry such heavy pails.’

‘Early in the morning, the warming sun creeps like a timid child slowly over the horizon while bringing with it a warming glow casting long shadows.’

One lesson observed shows how the writing workshop operates. The lesson was part of a unit of work on suspense writing. The learning objectives involved using a range of suspense techniques and different sentence openers to vary their writing. The teacher provided a 'suspense writing toolkit' which formed part of the 'working wall'. This included questions, short sentences, prompts about noises and shadows, and instructions to 'introduce cold/dark, bring in the unexpected'. The warm-up activities were to complete sentences such as 'Hardly daring to breathe, Andy...' One pupil responded '...crawled under the table.' The teacher immediately asked: 'how did he crawl?' Other exercises on sentence starters followed: 'Without warning... Shaking with fear...'

The teacher then read an extract from *Danny, the Champion of the World*. The pupils' task was to continue it. A clear structure was provided by the teacher: the opening to be one of the warm-up sentences written earlier; followed by a paragraph using multi-sensory description; then a final paragraph introducing an unexpected element. Twenty minutes were provided for the writing. The teacher constantly intervened and questioned: 'How did he step into the forest?'; 'What kind of twigs brushed against his skin?' There was a strong emphasis on sharing ideas, learning from each other, the pupils becoming real writers. The lesson shared many of the features of a creative writing session for adults. The pupils were serious and fully engaged in the task. What was most impressive was their readiness to experiment and change; this is not common practice in schools. These pupils were confident to alter words, cross out and revise as they wrote. Later, the pupils reviewed their writing against some of the toolkit prompts: use of shadows, questions, strong verbs, suspense techniques. [An example of one pupil's writing](#) during the lesson shows her plans and notes, as well as the first draft she completed. The high quality of writing produced by pupils in the

lesson confirmed the positive impact of the workshop approach and the confidence that pupils showed in different aspects of the writing process. The extent to which they were able to plan, reflect, change and edit as they wrote was especially impressive.

Extended writing

One final aspect of the school's approach to writing is worth describing. Inspectors frequently comment on the relative lack of extended writing in schools. Common practice in many primary schools is for pupils to spend two or three weeks working towards an extended piece of writing. In the meantime they analyse short exemplar texts, perhaps producing their own brief pieces of writing. For example, when working on persuasive writing, pupils might spend considerable time talking about, identifying and then writing examples of rhetorical questions, using certain connectives and composing different types of sentence. At this school, the policy is for pupils to produce concentrated and extensive texts in all lessons. Accordingly, a unit on persuasive writing featured topics over a three-week period that included: 'Should primary children eat more healthy food?'; 'Do we need a new bridge in Runcorn?'; 'Should the school have a tuck shop at lunchtimes?'; 'Should under-21s be allowed to buy alcohol?'; 'Should primary children have homework?'; 'Should pupils choose who to sit with in class?'; 'Should Everton and Liverpool share a football ground?'; and 'Should Hermia (in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream') be able to choose whom to marry?' All pupils produced extended writing in response to each of these tasks. It is no wonder that they move on to secondary school feeling confident about themselves as writers.

The school's background

Castle View Primary School is a small primary school in Runcorn, Cheshire. Most pupils who attend this school come from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The vast majority are of White British origin and only a tiny minority speak English as an additional language. A higher-than-average proportion of pupils are entitled to free school meals, are disabled, or have special educational needs.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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