

Designs on writing (1)

Debra Myhill begins a series of 3 articles in which she will offer strategies, based on recent research, to help learners improve their understanding of the writing process.

Most of us have experienced the ‘problem’ of the blank page or the empty screen waiting to be filled with words of genius! Indeed, as I start writing this article, the temptation to have another cup of coffee, read my email or sort my computer files into new folders is embarrassingly powerful. Why this pull to work-avoidance? I know more or less the gist of what I want to say, I’m not fretting about my spelling or punctuation, I have a sense of the over-arching structure of this text and, moreover, I enjoy writing. So, what is stopping me?

Every act of writing, other than the most basic transactional message, is an act of creative transformation. It is so much more than the making of marks on a page or the transcription of thoughts into written words. Rather, it is a highly complex task requiring us to manage a multiplicity of demands — *What do I want to say? Have I chosen the right words? Will the reader understand? Is this a good idea? How should I start the piece?* Managing all these demands on our attention is a challenging task and it’s not surprising that so many children, and adults, are daunted by it. Tim Bowler, the children’s author, explains why he thinks writing is so demanding:

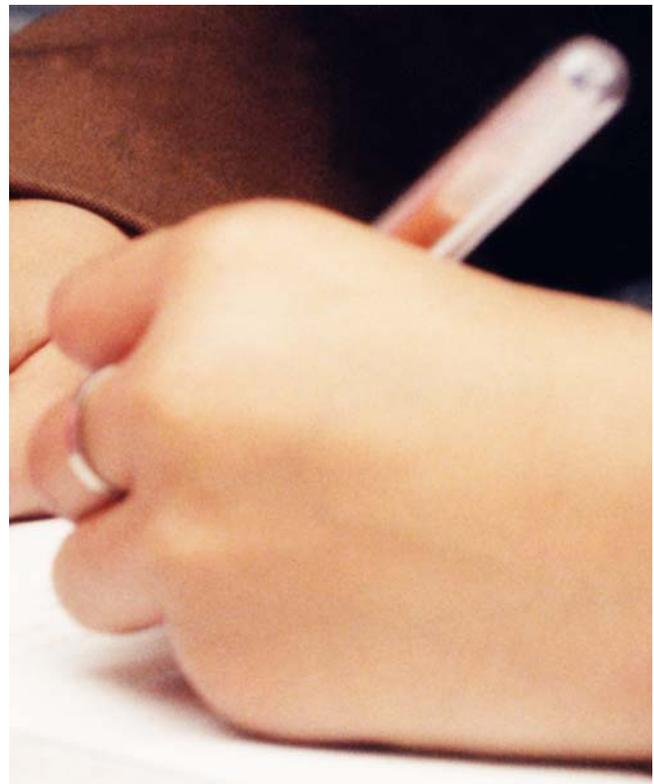
‘Why is writing so tricky? Because it requires mastery of two conflicting skills: a creative skill and a critical skill. The former is of the imagination, the latter of the intellect. . . . To write well, we have to employ both to maximum effect.’

I’m not sure that I agree that being critical is different from being creative; I would probably argue that being critical is an essential element of being creative; but Tim Bowler’s point, that writing requires both the imagination and the intellect and that we need to learn how to manage both these domains is a useful distinction. Psychologists have also drawn a similar distinction: writers have to create ideas and generate text which expresses those ideas, or put another way, writers have to deal both with

the content of their writing, and with the *rhetorical problem* of how to express that content in a text. Mike Sharples’ book, *How We Write: Writing as Creative Design*, is a wonderful exploration of these issues: he suggests that writing is about creative thinking and problem-solving, and that writing is a design activity.

Thinking about writing as an act of design

From the perspective of the classroom, the concept of writing as the design of ideas on paper or screen is an immensely helpful way to develop thinking, as it provides a metaphor which captures both the decision-making and the creativity that are so important in effective writing. When a writing task is set, it establishes a cluster of design problems which need to be solved





and a corresponding set of design choices to be made. There are numerous possible problems and choices, but they can be synthesized into three key design questions:

1. What do I want to say? (generating ideas)
2. How should I say it? (planning and translating ideas into text)
3. Is it working? (evaluating)

At Exeter University, we have just completed an ESRC funded research project exploring the writing of learners in Years 9 and 11, and one phase of this project involved watching students write in the classroom and then talking to them afterwards about their writing and writing processes. Many of these students were able to articulate the design problems they were encountering before and during writing:

What do I want to say?

'I was just thinking what can I do, what can I do with this picture?'

'If you don't have a good idea to start with, the whole piece isn't going to be very good and that's the problem I had with this piece, I didn't really have any ideas at all.'

'I couldn't think of anything else to write.'

How should I say it?

'I know what I want to write about, but I don't know the best way of doing that.'

'Sometimes I know exactly what I want to say, but I just can't think of a good way to phrase it.'

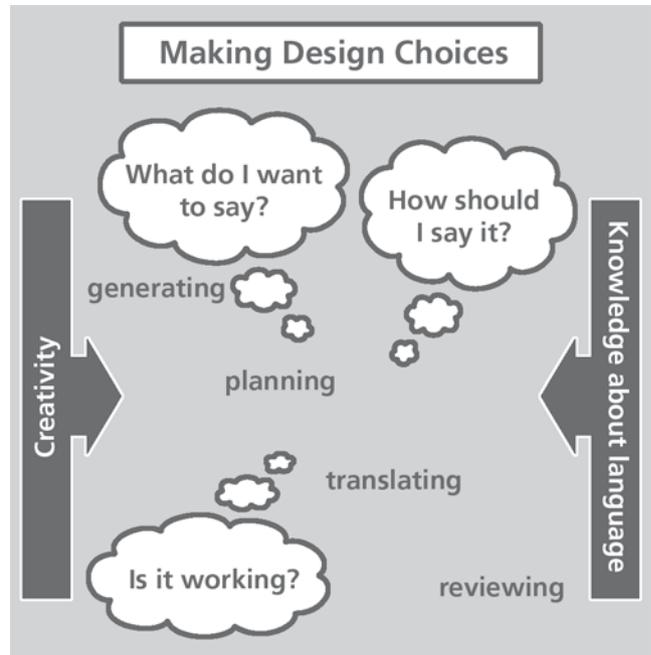
Is it working?

'Some sentences I find I write but don't really fit in that particular place or they aren't really all that relevant to that situation. I may cross them out sometimes or edit half of one.'

'I did read back a few times because I was quite concerned that it wasn't that good.'

'Once I've written it, I don't think it's really good. I think it's good when I write it and then when I read it, it sounds really stupid.'

Confidence in coping with these design problems requires both creative imagination and knowledge about language and texts, but it also requires writers who can think about their writing from different angles or perspectives, and not simply as a task of translating words onto paper. This way of thinking can be introduced to writers using a classroom poster such as the one below.



This is one way of opening up the writing process for discussion and showing that the problems we face when we write are the natural consequence of writing as a design activity, not our own inherent incompetence.

Classroom activity: Cross-curricular connections

Ask children to compare the design process in Design and Technology with the idea of writing as design. This could include annotating D & T worksheets with parallels from writing; or using prompt questions from D & T project design workshops and applying them to a writing task.

Verbal and visual design

Many English teachers are already very familiar with the idea of analysing the visual images which appear in texts, though most frequently from a media studies perspective. But the idea of composition in writing involving visual design is often overlooked, despite the fact that almost all texts in the public domain now involve some element of visual design. The impact of technology has been a powerful influence here and writing is essentially a multimodal activity in which the text on the page or screen has become a complex inter-relationship between verbal and visual features. Indeed, Gunther Kress has argued that we have given insufficient attention to helping young writers

understand the need to control ‘*the display of the text on the page*’, and he maintains that we have not really addressed the subtle ways in which the page is ‘*a meaningful or significant element in writing*’. It’s not just images, however, which are significant to this notion of visual design — choices about font, for example, influence the way a text is read.

Classroom activity: exploring fonts

Ask children to discuss whether the different fonts below convey different messages, and what influences how we interpret different fonts.

CAUTION — HAZARDOUS CHEMICALS

Caution — hazardous chemicals

Caution —
hazardous chemicals

**CAUTION —
HAZARDOUS CHEMICALS**

Caution — hazardous chemicals

**CAUTION —
HAZARDOUS CHEMICALS**

Caution
hazardous chemicals

It is a pity that writing is still predominantly assessed as an exclusively verbal endeavour, and in examinations as a verbal handwritten endeavour, even though reading assessments often do include texts with visual design features. A consequence of this assessment pattern is that the potential of technology in developing writing is often under-played: the technology is an active part of the writing process, not simply a convenient reprographic tool. A key point here, though, is that writing as design is about *both the visual and the verbal*, not just the visual effects. A confident writer chooses words, phrases and sentences carefully and makes decisions about how to present them visually in a manner which lends credibility to the written text. This is true even for texts without obvious visual components — a letter of complaint in Comic Sans 14 or a children’s book in Times New Roman 10, single spaced, would look very odd.

Designing as a conscious activity

One benefit of teaching writing as a design activity, and encouraging writers to see themselves as designers, is that it makes the decision-making involved in writing much more visible. Some writers may already be subconsciously or implicitly

making design choices in their writing, probably influenced by their reading experiences. Many writers, however, especially those lacking confidence, are dogged by perceptions of writing as about being right or wrong, whereas accuracy is only one element of effective writing. Perfectly spelled, perfectly punctuated and grammatically correct writing can be very, very dull and may be wholly inappropriate for communicating its message to its intended audience. Helping writers to become increasingly aware of the choices available to them to begin to hand over ownership and responsibility to the writer, developing independence and autonomy. This means that teaching needs to support writers in developing awareness of the design choices possible in different texts, and also needs to support children in thinking about and discussing these design choices.

At the heart of this is the principle that designers understand, rather than mimic. Explicit teaching of genre features and the use of heavy supports for writing — writing frames or sentence generators, for example — are rarely sufficient to encourage independence in writing. They are valuable teaching strategies for introducing the design features, but continued use can lead to dependent writers with formulaic writing habits. Moving from explanations of how texts to work to focussed

Classroom activities: exploring design features with ICT

- ◆ Design the home page for a website to support revision of multicultural poetry for GCSE: this should include designing the structure of the site and the links to further pages. These link pages could subsequently be designed by groups once the home page is set up.
- ◆ Design an information leaflet on healthy eating using either advanced word-processing or a DTP package. This is a common writing task but it is frequently undertaken with paper, pen and crayons, missing all the authentic design opportunities of ICT.
- ◆ Design a PowerPoint presentation limited to just 4 or 5 slides to summarise a group discussion on a controversial topic. Designers should think about how to summarise key ideas succinctly; how to phrase ideas; how to use sentence stems and appropriate follow ons; what font style and size to use; what side transitions and animation effects to use, if any; what slide background to use.
- ◆ Explore the design features of a range of information texts, possibly on the same topic but for different audiences e.g. EyeWitness Guides; Horrible Histories; Dorling Kindersley books; Usborne books etc

When each of these tasks has been completed, invite their ‘designers’ to explain and reflect on the design choices they have made. The discussion should be directed to both visual and verbal design choices, and how the two complement each other.



discussion and reflection on writing is one strategy for assisting the transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Many of the cognitive studies of the writing process emphasise the importance of metacognitive discussion and show that better writers are also more metacognitively aware. The table below offers prompts for thinking, rather than prompts for writing, and opens up the design process for scrutiny and exploration.

Thinking about designing writing	
	What do I want to communicate?
	What effects do I want to achieve?
	What is the best way to say this?
	How do I want it to look?
	How do I design this for my intended reader?
	Does it work — is it any good?

In our ESRC research, interviewing children about their writing was one of the most rewarding experiences in the study. Although not all children were confident talking about their own writing processes, and relatively fewer were confident talking about the choices they had made in their writing, many of these teenage writers were aware of what they wrote and what they were trying to do. It was evident that sometimes it was a struggle to articulate this clearly — not surprisingly, as we were asking them to put into words thought processes which they had probably never explicitly given voice to previously. The comments below are typical of the range of reflections these young learners demonstrated. Here they reflect variously on the planning processes they engage in before writing, some of the things that cause them problems as they write, and some of the effects they were trying to achieve.

'I saw how exactly what I wanted to say and exactly how in my mind I'm going to map out on the page even, like before I start writing the first sentence of the whole thing, but then, obviously, in your mind you can't write these huge complex sentences which are fine to (?) and then when I'm pausing between sentences, unless I'm thinking about the weekend, I'm sort of thinking about how to phrase it so it makes sense and it's in good English and stuff.'

'I would probably plan a little bit, but not really that much... really plan rough what I'm going to do or think about in my head first.'

'I think there's too much information in my head and if I put it all down, it would just be a big long list, so it's kind of hard to get it into some kind of readable format.'

'I think I pause quite a lot, I'm quite unsure of actually writing things down, I want to have it the best it can be before it's actually written down.'

'I was trying to achieve, like, an old-fashioned style, like a Morris Minor is like an old-fashioned car, and like a manor house appears to be like a big house, or something. It suggests to me that, like, some of the rooms aren't used, or something. (?) manor, because it's so big or something. And then I tried to include how it was bleak in the mid winter to try and build up tension to see, like, things which are big and (?) and like a detective normally goes into... it's normally dark and (?)'

'I knew what I wanted to say, but it was practically that the structure didn't really help me because I didn't know really what kind of style to put it in.'

'Well, I decided that I would have, sort of, commentary from the TV and, like, news flashes all the time.'

Several of these writers commented on how helpful they had found the interview experience because it gave them the chance to think and talk about their writing, rather than being totally engaged in doing the writing. We may well develop better writers not by doing more writing but by generating more thinking about writing. And, I would argue, central to this is creating opportunities for exploring writing as design and reflecting on the writing process as a design process. Ernest Hemingway famously said that *'Prose is architecture, not interior decoration'*. If we help young writers gain access to a repertoire of design choices, we may help them become the architects of their own texts, rather than interior decorators, subservient to the whims and fads of current fashion.

Debra Myhill is Professor of Education at Exeter University and subject leader for English. Her publications include *Better Writers* (Courseware Publications) and *Talking, Listening, Learning: Effective Talk in the Primary Classroom* (Open University Press)

References: Sharples, M (1999) *How We Write: Writing as Creative Design* London: Routledge; Kress, G (1997) *Before Writing: rethinking the paths to literacy* London: Routledge; Bowler, T (2002) 'Write off your plans and go with the flow' *The Times Educational Supplement* 16.08.02

The second and third of Debra Myhill's articles on exploring writing will look at sentence design and then paragraph design.