

Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

About the author

Susan Elkin is an education journalist, former secondary school English teacher and author of over 30 books. She has worked for many years to promote and develop children's writing at all levels.

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Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

THE book of practical ideas for supporting writing

Susan Elkin



Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

by Susan Elkin

Published by Ransom Publishing Ltd.

Radley House, 8 St. Cross Road, Winchester, Hants. SO23 9HX, UK

www.ransom.co.uk

ISBN 978 184167 971 6

First published in 2011

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.

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Contents

	Introduction	10
	Is this book for you?	14
1	Never Too Young to Start	17
	The Issues	18
	Writing is part of everyday life	18
	‘Le graphisme’	19
	Early drawing	20
	Shaping letters	21
	Progressing to a pen or pencil	22
	Handwriting: ‘print’ or cursive?	24
	Teaching cursive writing from the outset	26
	Forming letters	27
	Left-handedness	28
	Adults as scribes	29
	Forming words	29
	Sentence building	30
	Practical Teaching Ideas	32
	Finger painting	32
	Fly away Peter	34
	Scribing	35
	Pretend writing	36
	Writing your name	37
	Filling in gaps	38
	Spelling practice	38
	Word building	39
	Story characters you know	39
	Writing and sending letters	40
	Making notices, labels and signs	40
	Writing news	42
	Writing rhymes	42
	Writing lists	43
	Let’s make a story	44

6

Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

2	Persuading Children to Write	47
	The Issues	48
	Reading and writing	48
	Stories	49
	Creative writing and creative reading	50
	Declining interest in fiction	51
	Writing for 'real' purposes	53
	Practical Teaching Ideas	56
	Frameworks for writing	56
	Creative sentences	58
	Building stories around objects	58
	Describing objects	60
	Writing instructions	61
	Anecdotes	61
	Verses for greetings cards	61
	Epitaphs	62
	Using books as a starting point	63
	Following up film and TV	65
	Activities for children who are struggling	66
3	Fiction, Plays and Poems	71
	The Issues	72
	The scope of fiction	72
	Stories	73
	Names for characters	76
	Beginnings, middles and endings	77
	Dialogue	80
	Plays	81
	Poetry	85
	Practical Teaching Ideas	88
	Interesting objects	88
	Pictures	89
	Postcards	91
	Fan fiction	92
	Tie-ins with writing events	92
	Limericks	93
	Colour	96
	Haikus	98

	Plays from known stories – KS1 (ages 5 – 7)	99
	Plays from known stories – KS2 & 3 (ages 7 – 14)	100
	Plays from other sources	101
	Made-up plays	102
4	Writing Non-fiction	105
	The Issues	106
	Fiction ‘versus’ non-fiction	106
	Signalling alternatives to fiction	107
	Expressing opinions in writing	109
	Letters from children	110
	Other forms of opinion writing	113
	Writing reviews	115
	Writing for practical purposes	117
	Practical Teaching Ideas	120
	Earliest memories	120
	Obituaries	121
	A room all for you	122
	Science experiment in two versions	123
	Fun with factual notes	124
	Book reviews published online	125
	Film, TV and theatre reviews	126
5	Writing with Digital Tools	131
	The Issues	132
	Digital tools and digital technologies	132
	The keyboard as a writing tool	133
	Are computers always best?	137
	Making the most of developing technologies	138
	Some findings about children’s writing and technology	140
	Practical Teaching Ideas	142
	Working with the youngest children	142
	Social networking	145
	Motivating reluctant writers	150
	Some additional ideas	153

6	Working with Professional Writers	157
	The Issues	158
	Professional writers	158
	Finding writers	160
	Structuring the writer's time	161
	What will it cost?	162
	Virtual author visits	163
	Practical Teaching Ideas	164
	Preparing for a visit from a novelist	164
	Preparing for a visit from a poet	165
	Preparing for a visit from a playwright or adaptor	166
	Preparing for a visit from a journalist	167
	After the author's visit	168
7	Publishing Children's Work	171
	The Issues	172
	Opportunities to publish	172
	Choosing work to publish	174
	Group writing	175
	Presentation	176
	Copyright	177
	Practical Teaching Ideas	180
	Reviews on websites	180
	Correspondence with fictional characters	182
	Variants of the Under Milk Wood idea	183
	Collaborative class blog	184
8	And so to Orthography	187
	The Issues	188
	How important are spelling and grammar?	188
	Writing: conventions or rules?	191
	Unlocking a fully literate writer	193
	Using computer spellcheckers	195
	Practical Teaching Ideas	198
	Older children with specific handwriting problems	198

Making alphabet books	199
Spelling aides-memoires	200
Use all your odd moments	201
Use word roots to make spelling more logical	203
Common error posters	203
Appendices	207
1 Basic Orthography	208
Word classes, or ‘parts of speech’	209
Punctuation	213
Grammar	218
Ten things to encourage children to remember in writing	221
Spelling	226
2 Further Reading	230
Index	232



Introduction

What do we mean by writing? Is it the ability to jot down a shopping list, or to send a text to tell your loved ones that you won't be back until 6pm?

Or is it the composing of 'great writing' such as *Hamlet* or *David Copperfield* or is it a strongly argued, eloquent newspaper article?

And what about words, sentences, stories, essays, reports (and so on) – written by children of all ages? Or the jottings of people who keep private diaries, write poems for pleasure or who blog just because they want to communicate with others?

Write' – which has no fewer than eighteen definitions in my Collins Dictionary (2003) – is an umbrella term.

'Writing' covers all the above and much more.

Writing is not, of course, the sole province of the Shakespeares, Churchills and Newtons of this world, although before universal compulsory education (introduced in 1870 in Britain) many people could not write even their own name.



There is an official document, for example, 'signed' with a cross by John Shakespeare, father of the playwright, when he was Mayor of Stratford.

In the 16th century it was possible to be both a successful businessman (Shakespeare senior was a glover) and completely illiterate.






Today, everyone has to be able to write, and all children are, of course, required to write things in almost every aspect of the curriculum, throughout their schooling and beyond.

Indeed, there are very few jobs, however menial, which don't require some sort of written work.

Reading and writing are complementary skills. Children learn the mechanics of writing by forming for themselves on paper the squiggles they are learning to decode.



Among other things, a writer is someone who:

-  draws or marks (symbols, words etc.) on a surface, usually paper, with a pen, pencil or other instrument
-  describes or records (ideas, experiences, etc.) in writing
-  composes a letter
-  writes words in joined-up script, as opposed to printed style
-  is a composer of books, documents, plays, poems, etc.

... and that's before we start on the meanings of 'write down', 'write in', 'write off', and 'write up'.

12 Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

Writing can be, and is, developed alongside reading and language development – which I discuss in depth in my book *Unlocking the Reader in Every Child* (Ransom Publishing, 2010). But, because writing requires motor skills and coordination, which reading doesn't, it usually comes more gradually.

Somehow, as part of literacy development, we have to find ways of getting children to write – both in very basic, functional ways (e.g. a shopping list) and creatively.

Children need to be able to write in many different registers and for a wide range of purposes.

These purposes might include:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ✓ letters | ✓ reports |
| ✓ emails | ✓ interviews |
| ✓ stories | ✓ notes |
| ✓ reviews | ✓ blogs |
| ✓ factual accounts, such as writing up the results of a science experiment | ✓ articles for school magazines or other publications |
| ✓ play scripts | ✓ commentaries on, for example, their own art or design technology work |
| ✓ poems | |
| ✓ biographical and autobiographical accounts | ... and much more. |

Many children really want to be able to write because they see adults doing it as part of everyday grown-up life – for practical purposes at least. That is why children will often do 'pretend' writing as part of their play activities. This is something to be encouraged, because it's part of the developing awareness that writing – or print – has meaning.

Children also see adults texting, sending emails or messages on Twitter and other social networking sites, and so on. Versions of these kinds of activities, too, can develop as part of play.




Stories and experiences are, of course, a wonderful source of inspiration for children's imaginative writing.



Typically a child's first writing will be an attempt to write his or her name (or the initial letter of it) – with help – on, perhaps, a birthday card at home or a piece of art work at nursery.



Remember, writing is at least three things:

-  learning to form (or type) letters, words, sentences and paragraphs
-  creating interesting and appropriate blocks of text – generally known as 'good writing'
-  expressing ideas in clear, accurate and appropriate language.

Writing is quite hard work. To write at any length, either on paper or using a computer, needs stamina. How do we persuade children to remain interested in it without putting them off for life? This book suggests some solutions.



We also have to work out what we mean by 'good writing'.

Do we mean conventionally correct writing in terms of grammar, punctuation and spelling – known collectively as *orthography*?

14 Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

Well, obviously these things are very important and must be taught systematically, but they do not in themselves equal 'good' writing.

Fluent, joined-up handwriting matters too, but it isn't the essence of good creative work – which can, of course, be composed just as well on a computer as with a pen on paper. (I am, for example, writing this book using a computer.)

If we want to unlock the writer in every child, we have to teach and develop a wide vocabulary, used in original ways.

Sometimes it is appropriate to break conventional grammar rules (although of course you need to know the rules in order to do that!) or to use punctuation in unorthodox ways. Even spelling is a very different skill from writing well, and can be learned in parallel, separately, and then applied to the child's writing – as we shall see.



Is this book for you?

Many heavily academic books have been written about teaching writing. This is not one of them.

My aim in this book is twofold:

- 1 to provide a basic, quick-to-read guide to teaching and encouraging writing of all types and at all stages, and
- 2 to suggest practical 'try this' ideas to help overcome obstacles and, perhaps, to give some fresh perspectives.

So in this book I shall be moving from quick overviews to very 'hands on' things to try with children. That is why each chapter in this book is divided into two parts: first, a quick outline of key issues, followed by a section of practical teaching ideas.

I hope this book will help teachers, special needs co-ordinators, school (and other) librarians and anyone else working in schools, such as learning support assistants, teaching assistants and volunteers who help with literacy work.

But this is not a book just for professionals in schools.

Are you a parent or guardian trying to encourage your children to write? Or are you simply concerned that your children may not be progressing at the rate they should – and in the right way?

If so, you probably need information about how literacy teaching works – in which case this book is for you, too.

We all want to do the best we can to help our children, and developing effective literacy is probably the most important skill they will ever learn.

Remember, though, that no two pupils are the same – and every teacher is different. One size most definitely does not fit all. That is why it's useful to have plenty of strategies for getting reluctant writers going: what works for one pupil in one classroom with a particular teacher or learning assistant won't necessarily work in a different situation.



So we have to find ways of meeting individual needs. And parents at home, of course, are better placed than anyone to do just that. So don't be afraid to get involved if you want to help your own children.

Let's start with the very youngest ones.

1

Never Too Young to Start



1 Never Too Young to Start



The Issues



Writing is part of everyday life

Babies are mini learning machines – amongst other things.

Children learn more, and faster, in the first few months after birth than they do at any later stage in their life. This applies as much to their learning the foundations of writing as it does to everything else they learn during this period.

Of course you can't put a pencil in the hand of a new-born baby, but Josh or Emma sees (and hears) adults using pens, pencils, computers, mobile/smart phones and so on from the moment the midwife records the birth weight and the proud dad texts his parents with the good news.

Writing is part of everyday life – from day one.

Babies absorb far more than most adults realise or expect them to. Consider the way young children understand what is said to them (*'It's time for your nap,' 'Where's your teddy bear?'* and so on) long before they can speak.



I've never forgotten an experience when I was looking after a young relation aged 10 months for a few hours. Something had upset me, and I stood for a minute looking out of the window, shedding a tear.

Young Jemina crawled across to me and gently stroked my leg to express sympathy. She understood, without being told, that I needed comfort.

The physical activity of writing requires:



Motor skills

To make a mark on paper or on a screen, you have to make some sort of muscular movement.



Co-ordination.

You have to manage the paper, crayon, screen, keyboard (or whatever you are using) with your hands and your eyes – *and* at the same time.



'Le graphisme'

In France, infants teachers place great emphasis on what they call '*le graphisme*' – a word which doesn't really translate. It means something like 'the graphic act' and involves careful preparation of young children for writing through art work, PE, music and rhythm.

The focus in *le graphisme* is on developing:



overall motor control – the ability to control one's body




fine motor control – the ability to fine-tune the movements of the arm, hand and fingers



visual control of the traces produced by the hand, and

20 Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

-  spatial control of one's body, involving awareness of horizontality, verticality and how to transfer a movement onto paper.

Although there is no overall concept of *le graphisme* in the UK education system, it is well worth our bearing the concept in mind as we educate, stimulate and play with young children whose writing skills we hope one day to unlock.

Many of the activities suggested in the second half of this chapter are, effectively, ways of working on *le graphisme*.



Le graphisme has been thoroughly researched by Kent primary school teacher Fiona Thomas, who then applied its principles in her school with very interesting results.

You can read her account of this, 'Une Question de Writing' (1998), at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9604.00054/abstract>.



Early drawing

A child with a crayon is starting to develop the hand control that will eventually be needed to form small letters. That child is also beginning to practise shapes. After all, the 26 letters of the English alphabet are based on circles or part circles, strokes and dots – exactly what the young child draws on the paper.

Always encourage drawing and art work in the youngest children. It's valuable in itself, but it is also an essential stepping stone on the journey to writing.

Meanwhile you can help the youngest children by playing games with them that use their fingers. Songs with actions, or storytelling in which fingers become puppets and sorting beads, are good examples. Anything that helps strengthen their muscles.



Shaping letters

As the child's drawing develops, those circles and strokes can gradually be formed into big letters. Usually the first to be formed is the initial letter of the child's name, such as S for Susannah, I for Ishmael, B for Bashar or J for Jasmine. To begin with, they will not be able to write their letters small, lacking the necessary fine motor skills. However the children can colour their big letters in, thus creating illuminated letters for the classroom wall.



Try to avoid the disjointed 'ball and stick' approach to forming letters. In the past children were often taught that a 'b', for example, is a circle with a straight line next to it or that a 'g' is a circle with a hook underneath.

22 Unlocking the Writer in Every Child

Instead, encourage the children to shape letters from one continuous, flowing line. Keep the crayon on the paper – which may mean going over some bits of the letter twice. This is important because of a recent development in the teaching of handwriting, which we shall come to shortly.



Progressing to a pen or pencil

If children are very young or very immature they will not be ready to hold a narrow pencil or pen. If you force them before they're ready, they will soon find that writing hurts, because it causes cramp and other problems. That, naturally, puts them off writing – which is the last thing we want.

As the drawing evolves into writing, and finger skills improve, encourage the child to hold the pencil or crayon with the barrel lying loosely in the angle between the thumb and first finger.



How to hold a pen: the tripod position.

Three basics for good handwriting

- 1 **Paper:** use well-spaced, lined paper.
- 2 **Posture:** make sure that the desk and chair are at the right height. The child should be sitting comfortably, with a straight back.
- 3 **Pens & pencils:** a sharp HB pencil is recommended to start with. Avoid ballpoint pens.

The first finger should rest bent on the top of the pencil, which is held from the sides by the tip of the thumb and the side of the second finger.

Handwriting experts call this the ‘tripod position’. There are special pens and pencils on the market which can help some children with this. These writing implements have a triangular-shaped barrel with shallow concave grooves, so that the children’s small digits sit naturally where they should. These pens are in regular use in some schools.

Learning the tripod position – and establishing good habits – will solve many problems later.



A child who holds a pencil too tightly, or who chooses some other form of grip, will probably have difficulty writing at length. He or she may end up as an adult with problems with repetitive strain injury, too.