

Writing like an author



My advice to anyone who wants to improve their writing: read, read, read and write, write, write. In the context of teaching young students ... read, talk, draw and write.

(Libby Gleeson Writing like a writer 2014 p.vi)

Writing like an author means you have the skills to control the things you want to say.

What we want for our students is to be able to read and enjoy, and to be able write and enjoy, text that grabs and holds us; text that makes us feel empathy for characters and their situation, or fear, or joy, or the agony of loss, or to be argued with or against, to be persuaded and to find out stuff.

The creation of all types of text involve what Noella Mackenzie calls the ‘authorial’ and the ‘secretarial’ elements of writing (Mackenzie 2011)

Authorial writing skills:

- understanding how to create a particular kind of written text (e.g. a business letter or a report)
- knowing how to construct sentences for the particular text
- being able to choose the vocabulary for each text.

Secretarial writing skills:

- spelling
- punctuation
- handwriting or keyboarding.

Mackenzie (2015)

These are the aspects of writing that we actively and explicitly teach. Our syllabuses, continuums and progressions provide the structures for development.

The act of writing can become a natural and automatic part of the daily activities of the classroom, to provide the practice required to build these skills. Students need frequent and repeated opportunities to be in control of their writing and drawing. Regular practice supports all skills, as students know what they want to say, and the words they want to use. As the author, they can see the value of being absolutely clear which word and meaning is intended for the reader. They come to school already knowing that images and text convey meanings, and we can build on that.

Students need to feel confident in their attempts at authorship, and in having their words valued.

Here is a strategy which provides such opportunities.

Learning Journals – valuing student thinking and writing



This strategy provides opportunity to make notes, to summarise, to reflect on content, and to respond to text. Build the process into your daily activities to build author confidence and writing skills. Students will require a 'learning' book devoted to this process. Teacher modelling of the process is extremely valuable, so get one for yourself, too.

- Students use the left half of the open notebook for recording what a focus text is about. They write what is factual and literal, and practise summarising paragraphs, using diagrams and pictures, identifying main ideas, noting important details, and choosing quotations, for example.
- On the right half of the notebook students note down responses, impressions, questions or any connections they make as they respond to the text.

The Journal sits well with students who have learned to use Making Connections and Summarising comprehension strategies.

Left-hand side of the page: Content questions

Teachers can set particular questions to be addressed in the left-hand section:

- What do you remember?
- What was the text about?
- What are the important ideas in the text?
- What is the focus of the text?
- Who is the target audience for the text?
- What is the author's intention in this text?

Right-hand side of the page: Interpretive questions

Students will use this side to think about their reading/listening/viewing and the meaning of the text. Questions which guide students into this way of reflecting on text include:

- Why did you remember some details and not others?
- What connections can you make between X and Y?
- What connections can you make between this text and the real world?
- How could you write about your new thoughts?
- What pictures does this text make in your head?
- Has this text made you change your ideas about X? Why?



- Why do you think this is important?
- What connections are there between you and this text?
- How does this text connect with other things you have read about?
- How does this reading build on our earlier discussion of the larger concept of X?

What kinds of texts work with a learning journal?

The strategy works for any kind of text content that you want students to reflect on:

- An advertisement
- Video games
- A character
- Class discussions
- Brochures
- An interview
- Art works
- Group work
- A science observation

The structure of the daily writing depends on the students' level of writing skill, and how familiar they are with the process. As they develop both of these, the content of the Learning Journal will become more sophisticated and complex. Pictures, tables, flow charts and drawings can be used – it is up to the author.

A good start may be by reading the class a highly structured and engaging novel such as *Rowan of Rin* by Emily Rodda (suitable Stage 2). Each chapter has easily accessible content, with excellent opportunities for recalling content, reflection and prediction. There are deeper meanings that become apparent as the story develops. Students can recall the events of the chapter after reading, then reflect on what they think, how the text made them feel, what they think might happen next.

Marking: It is not necessary to mark such an activity. The purpose is to get the ideas, the thinking, down on the page; it is informal. Students will edit and self-correct as they share their ideas. They can check their own grammar and spelling when refining notes into a more formal piece of work, if required. This is the opportunity to practise and use the grammatical and structural knowledge you teach in the formal writing lessons.

References

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