

Writing with purpose in tests



In general, in the Australian Curriculum: English, texts can be classified as belonging to one of three types: imaginative, informative or persuasive ...

Classifications according to the particular purposes they are designed to achieve. These purposes influence the characteristic features the texts employ.

[Australian curriculum](#)

Testing writing

Writing is one of the integral components of the national testing program conducted every year for children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

We can best prepare our students for the writing part of the test is to focus on teaching the key elements of writing as described in both the Australian Curriculum and the NSW English syllabus.

Focus on purpose: Imaginative text

The Australian Curriculum:

Imaginative texts – their primary purpose is to entertain through their imaginative use of literary elements. They are recognised for their form, style and artistic or aesthetic value.

[Australian curriculum](#)

The NSW English syllabus:

Imaginative texts:

- represent ideas, feelings and mental images
- make new connections
- are characterised by originality, freshness and insight

That is, the purposes of the text determine what characteristic features the author will use, in order to achieve that purpose.

From *NSW English Syllabus* 2012. p.151

Our children are capable of creating exciting and innovative ideas, as we know. Have a look at these examples of writing:

Educator Fred Sedgwick works with students and poetry, and elicited these in a workshop about children considering their own potential:

*I am a tin of vegetables,
Make me a gravy roast.
I am a flame,
Make me the blazing sun.
I am the first number,
Count me to infinity.*

Michaela (10)

*I am a dull piece of metal,
Make me a flashy robot.
I am a fluffy duck,
Make me the golden eagle.*

Jesse (9)

Sedgwick (2000) pp103-104

This is what is possible.

How can we get to there from here? And how can we get this richness in a test?

The functional model

What we can do is understand the functional model of language – that is, the ways the language functions to achieve a range of purposes. This model informs the Australian curriculum. (See Derewianka, 2011, and Derewianka and Jones, 2016, for a good introduction to Professor Michael Halliday’s work.)

We can make sure our students understand the field, tenor and mode of the texts that impact on them, and that they create. We can make sure students are confident about identifying the main purpose of texts they are reading and writing, and the literary devices that authors choose to incorporate into their texts. We can help build their own confidence and skills in their own originality.

We can work with our students to examine the representations of ideas, feelings and mental images when they are writing imaginative texts.

What we can do is provide the models, explicit instruction, and the time and repeated opportunity to write and reflect on text.



Sample test



This is the sample stimulus teachers can use to assist their students to prepare to write ‘a narrative or story’ in the test situation.

https://www.nap.edu.au/_resources/NAP_website_example_writing_prompt_narrative_The_Box.pdf

What's missing are those elements of text that make writing purposeful. In a classroom practice situation, we can provide the guidance to help build the elements to make a text based on this stimulus worthwhile.

Field - what is the subject matter? Is the student to write about the box, or about a complex series of events? 'A narrative or story' is very broad, so our students need to have had exposure to many texts and to have talked about them using this type of interrogation.

Tenor – who is involved? The student has to guess who might be involved in the ownership of the box, the role of the narrator, the roles of others – as well as the series of events inspired by the stimulus box. Not an easy task!

Mode – how carefully crafted does this story need to be? This will depend on the previous two elements of the register of this text being created.

In the test situation, our students need to have enough of the knowledge of the craft of authorship to be able to do this for themselves.

Teaching writing

When we are teaching our children to develop their skills in writing imaginative texts, we can use a wide variety of genres, both as models and for our students to develop for themselves.

These texts include novels, traditional tales, poetry, stories, plays, fiction for young adults and children including picture books and multimodal texts such as film.

[Australian curriculum](#)

This is where we can work with the really good fun stuff of writing, all those elements of writing that help students to represent ideas and feelings, to create mental images, to make new connections and to be original, fresh and insightful.

The wonderful words and ideas are in the excellent texts that we read to our students every day, that we use as models for engaging story-telling and exciting writing, and where we find the effective literary devices of figurative language for discussion and emulation.

Some examples for younger students include:

- ‘[Animalia](#)’ by Graeme Base and ‘[Fantastic Mr Fox](#)’ by Roald Dahl show creative use of [Alliteration](#). There is a list of mostly American alliterative books on [this website](#). Try to avoid most alphabet-based books for teaching alliteration – they can become tedious and contrived rather than fresh.
- *The Smartest Giant in Town* by Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler (You Tube Audio [here](#)) and *An Ordinary Day* by Libby Gleeson & Armin Greder are simple examples of *evaluative language* and *hyperbole*.

Then there’s *idiom*, *onomatopoeia*, *personification* and all the rest of the fabulous figurative language repertoire that we find in every quality text we work with in our classrooms. Each of these is described briefly in the Glossary of the [NSW English K-10 syllabus](#).

This is the real fun of reading and creating text through writing, ‘characterised by originality, freshness and insight’.



Support for teaching using authentic texts

- Loraine Macdonald's *A Literature Companion for Teachers* (2nd Ed. PETAA 2018) demonstrates brilliantly in Chapter 9 with excerpts from various texts to illustrate figurative language
- Chapter 4 in Derewianka and Jones' 2016 volume *Teaching Language in context* has a comprehensive explanation of 'Language for appreciating and creating story worlds'. There are good examples of text for both older and younger students
- The [Children's Book Council of Australia](#) is a reliable resource. They have just announced their 2019 short list of excellent books. Well worth a look. School librarians are usually on top of this. Look for all that effective literary language children can use.
- The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA) partners with CBC each year to produce support materials for the short list. Check out their resources. [Check out 2019 here](#).
- The Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority ([QCAA](#)) has comprehensive explanation on pages 25, appropriate questions for assessing evaluative language used by students, and excellent references
- ABC TV Education at <https://www.abc.net.au/tveducation/>
- Australian Children's Television Foundation at <https://actf.com.au/>
- The Australian Edition of Liz Chamberlain's *Inspiring Writing in Primary Schools*, edited by Penny Hutton (PETAA 2017), particularly Chapter 8, 'Using quality children's literature', where the purpose is to persuade and to entertain using the Owl Post from Hogwarts as stimulus
- Joanne Rossbridge and Kathy Rushton's *Put it in Writing* (PETAA 2015) provides an excellent model for working with all three types of text, and step-by-step support to progress students.

References:

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) (2012) *Australian curriculum: English* <https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/glossary/?letter=T> accessed 10/04/2019
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- Derewianka, B. (2011) *A New Grammar Companion for teachers* e:lit/PETA: Newtown
- Derewianka, B, & Jones, P. (2nd Ed. 2016) *Teaching Language in Context* OUP: Australia
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- Sedgwick, F. (2000) *Writing to Learn: Poetry and literacy across the primary curriculum* Routledge Falmer: London