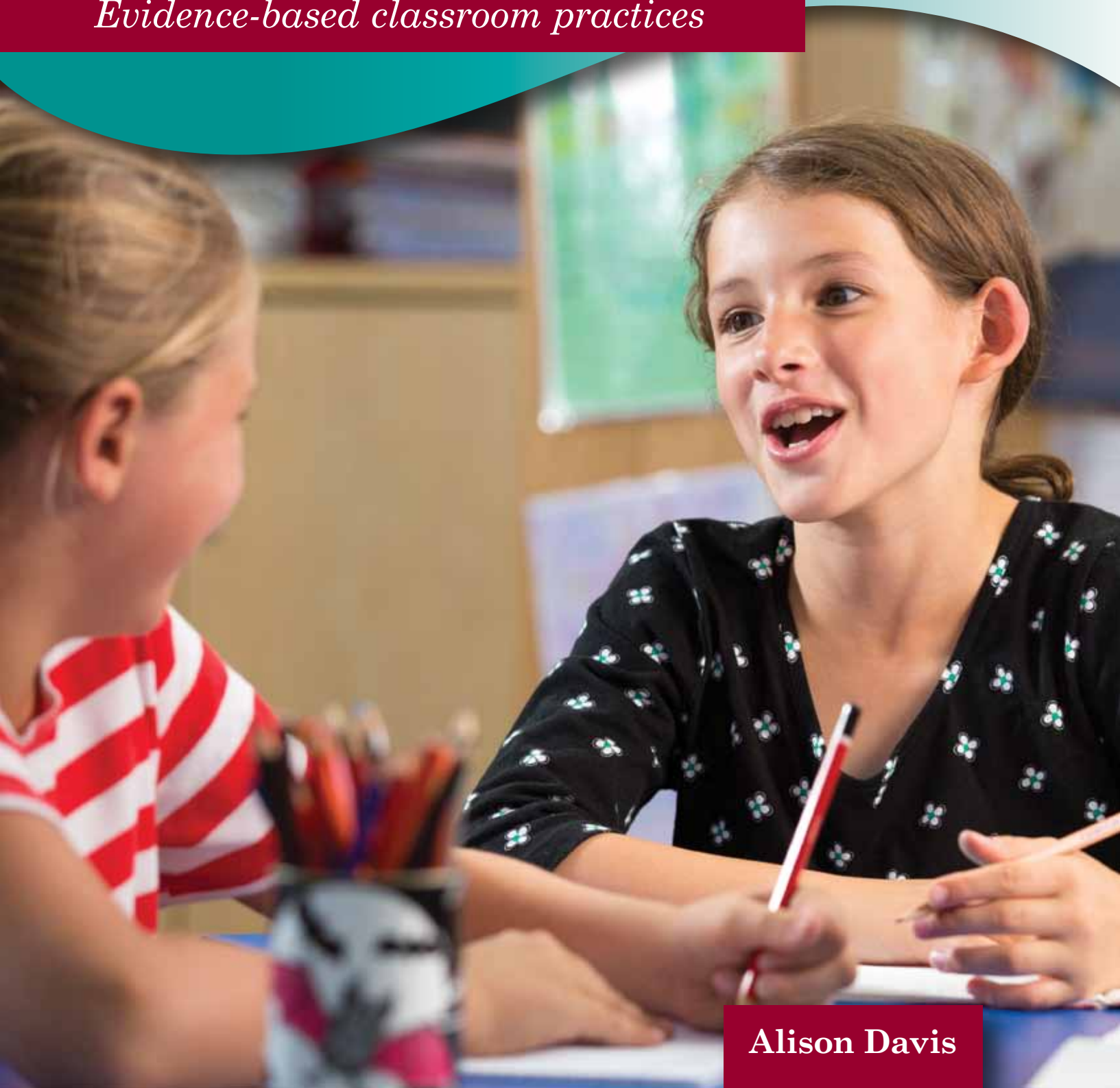


Effective writing instruction

Evidence-based classroom practices




Alison Davis



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Chapter 1

Developing effective writing instruction

Key ideas

- Learning to write is a thinking process, so being aware of what you are doing is an essential part of the process.
- Metacognitive writing refers to the capacity of writers to be self-reflective—not just to think and know, but to think about their thinking and knowing.
- Deliberate, planned and regular instruction of writing, with multiple and varied opportunities to write, is central to creating skilled and confident writers.
- Engagement and motivation are fundamental to effective writing and to developing effective writers.
- Skilled writers monitor and regulate their own writing. They are highly metacognitive in developing their writing knowledge, understandings and behaviours. They demonstrate and develop metalinguistic awareness.
- Quality talk—before, during and after writing—enhances learning and is essential for success.
- During instruction, teachers and students make deliberate links between reading, writing and oral language which improve learning outcomes for all students.
- Skilled and proficient writers use writing as a tool to access the curriculum, to access and record real-life experiences and to write for authentic purposes.
- Writing development does not happen in isolation. Students require opportunities to develop and practise the processes of planning to write, composing text in various ways for different purposes and audiences, proofreading and editing. These opportunities need to occur over time and in a wide range of contexts.

Deliberate planned and regular instruction

Skilled and proficient writers write a lot. They engage with text and they explore text structures and language choices. Teachers plan for multiple opportunities for writing instruction throughout the day. Such teaching engages students in opportunities to talk about writing, to explore the var-

ied purposes for writing, to practise writing using new skills and strategies and to create a belief that writing is worthwhile, valuable and enjoyable.

Teachers and students know that effective writers are not created in a day, a week, a month or a year. Effective instruction builds on what was previously learned and what will be learned in the following weeks. It provides planned opportunities for learning about and through writing, for writing practice, for maintenance of skills and strategies and for transfer of skills and understandings to varied contexts.

Engagement and motivation

Engagement and motivation are fundamental to effective writing and to developing effective writers. For this to be possible, teachers and students need to have high expectations of success. Teachers demonstrate to their students, through both their actions and their comments, that they believe a student's success in writing is not just important, but also attainable. Oral and written comments to students that include feedback and praise encourage student engagement and motivation. For example:

Well done! I can see that you have really tried to improve this piece of writing and you have created a very interesting idea for me as a reader.

When I read this, I really saw the image you were describing! I loved the language you used to do this. Great work!

I can see that you are really trying with this explanation. By the end of our next lesson, you will be able to describe clearly how this machine works.

For students to be engaged and motivated about writing, they also need to develop a sense of competence about their writing and their ability to write well, along with a sense that writing is meaningful (Boscolo & Gelati 2007). Effective writing instruction is planned to scaffold learning to ensure that all students experience success and enjoyment in writing. Intrinsic to motivation to write is a student's set of beliefs about writing – the attitudes they have about writing and their own sense of writing competence. Therefore, it is important that there are opportunities and learning environments through which students are able to approach writing lessons and writing tasks with an expectation that they will be able to complete the task successfully and become stronger and more proficient writers as a re-

sult. Consequently, it is important that teachers and students believe that students can and will become effective writers. ‘Writing is fun’, ‘I can write well’ and ‘I enjoy writing’ are examples of students’ self-perception of writing, which in turn links to the degree to which a student becomes involved and interested in writing.

In addition, creating opportunities for writing instruction to link to students’ interests will provide both cognitive and motivational opportunities. Student interest creates a springboard for further learning, draws on students’ own personal and cultural backgrounds and experiences, and helps students to make sense of new or challenging concepts, situations and phenomena.

What are my students interested in?
 What do they already know and understand?
 How can I use their knowledge to create opportunities for writing?
 How can I create writing opportunities that will challenge and extend student understanding?
 How can I help students learn to enjoy the use of language and create written texts, such as those that inform, persuade, argue or entertain?



Engagement and motivation are further enhanced when instruction is planned to provide authentic purposes for student writing. Authentic purposes help students understand the relevance of their writing, make connections between what they know and are interested in, and provide opportunities for real-life writing. They provide a heightened reason for writing, a goal for writing and an opportunity for writing to be enjoyed, understood and used by others once it is completed. Authentic writing tasks may relate to personal experiences, topical issues and events and curriculum themes, topics and contexts.

Examples of authentic purposes for student writing include:

- to inform community members of an upcoming event at the school
- to persuade another student to their point of view on a current issue
- to explain why they found a short story particularly enjoyable to read
- to respond to a problem, drawing on their own personal experiences
- to help their readers understand the dangers or importance of a particular issue
- to explain their thinking about what they are learning in another subject, e.g. maths, science, social studies, health
- to respond to something they have read, e.g. a short story, a poem, an advertisement.

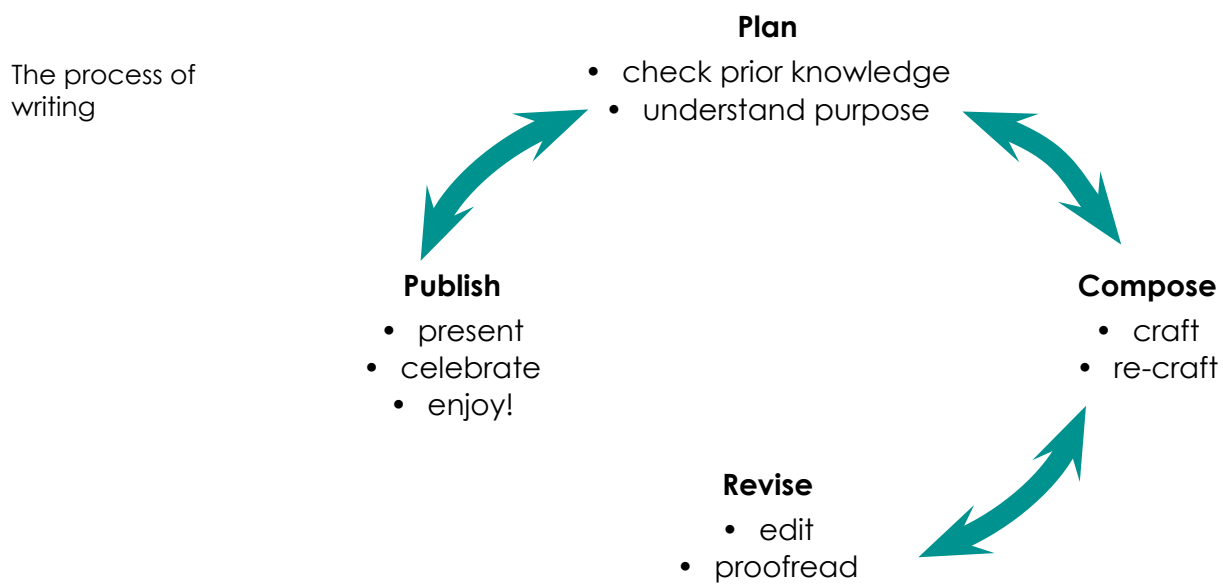
There are many and varied opportunities for authentic writing purposes and these will often draw on students’ own interests and experiences, as well as on studies from other curriculum learning areas. For further information on providing opportunities for students to share their writing with others, see *Chapter 8: Celebrating and responding to writing*.

Furthermore, engagement and motivation are strongly related to a student’s confidence and understanding of metacognition and self-regulatory skills (see pages 7 to 8).

Creating a writing-rich environment

In effective writing classrooms there is a commitment to learning to write—teachers are committed to teaching students to plan, compose and revise, and students are committed to improving their own writing. It takes time for students to acquire the competencies of skilled writing. Classrooms with lots of writing materials show that teachers are mindful not just of effective instruction, but the way the environment contributes to student achievement over time. Teachers and students can create effective and engaging classroom writing environments that are filled with a variety of writing materials, content, tools and opportunities.

A further characteristic of writing-rich environments is the amount of quality teaching that occurs. Quality teaching includes preparation for writing, skill teaching and scaffolded support, and multiple opportunities to develop self-regulation skills. Through rich instruction, teachers provide guidelines for starting, developing, consolidating and completing writing. This is generally referred to as the process of writing. This process is not linear, but is cyclic in nature.



Students need to overcome the complexity of the writing process—no matter how practised they are at writing, they will still often use the writing process to compose their message. Effective teaching demystifies the stages in the process. In rich classroom teaching environments, teachers share examples of their own writing at these stages, they provide a range of activities through which the process of writing is explained, modelled, scaffolded and reviewed, and they provide daily instruction and practice.

In addition, writing-rich classroom environments create a clear sense in students that they can become writers. They develop a strong culture within students that writing is worthwhile, valuable and definitely worth the effort to learn how to do well. In these classrooms, writing instruction is not only a focal point for instruction, but is integrated with other instruction in response to reading and across the curriculum.

Metacognition and self-regulation

Metacognition is knowing about thinking and thinking about thinking. Metacognition enables students to become aware of and understand how they think, and the strategies they use to help them think¹. Cognitive skills are often described as mental or learning skills; they are the skills necessary for students to use in order to learn (Davis 2007, 2011). In the context of writing, metacognition refers to developing knowledge and control of the strategies used in the process of creating meaning through writing. These strategies help a writer to form intentions for writing, to plan and select ideas to create meaning for their reader, to compose text for a range of purposes with skill and accuracy, and to revise work in light of purpose, audience and task expectations. Part of becoming metacognitive is the development of a student's metalinguistic awareness—their ability to think about the uses of language—as they learn about and through writing. Students learn to develop a conscious awareness of how language can be used, including vocabulary selection, phrases, language devices and academic language.

In the context of writing instruction, metacognitively active writers are able to think about and articulate:

- what learning in writing is—the academic skills, strategies and processes that enable students to become proficient and skilled writers
- their own achievement in writing—when they are achieving and when they are not, their writing strengths and needs
- strategies they can employ to develop and improve and the learning benefits of doing so
- the specific actions they will take to improve—and actually taking these actions
- their own progress, reflecting critically on their learning and themselves as a writer—What processes and strategies do I know, use

¹ The term *metacognition* initially developed from the early work of Flavell (1979) along with the work of Vygotsky (1962) from whose work the term *self-regulation* was coined.

and control? What do I need to do next? How will I do this? How will I know if I have been successful?

When students reflect on their progress as learners, they become increasingly aware of their own progress and achievement and where they need to move to next. Intrinsic to this is the concept of self-regulation. Self-regulation refers to learners' thoughts, actions and feelings towards attaining specific outcomes or goals. Self-regulatory strategies include setting goals, knowing and choosing the best way(s) to achieve a task, monitoring one's own achievements and seeking help as needed in order to reach the goal (Davis 2011; Graham & Harris 2005; Zimmerman 2000).

Effective writing instruction will develop students' self-confidence and independence in selecting and using appropriate strategies to address the challenges and the demands of writing within the specific writing task they are undertaking. Thus, deliberately teaching self-regulatory strategies is an important part of teaching students to master the cognitive processes of composing text, to write for a variety of purposes and to become independent problem-solvers of writing. Furthermore, self-regulation and the teaching of self-regulatory skills enable students to develop positive attitudes about writing.

Learning to write is a thinking process, so being aware of what you are doing is an essential part of the process of becoming a skilled and proficient writer. This requires not only knowing what to write, but also how to write.

Teachers deliberately support a metacognitive approach to teaching writing by helping their students to think about:

- What type of writing task am I learning?
- What is the purpose of the task?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What text type will I use?
- What knowledge will I need to be able to plan, draft, revise, edit and share my work?
- What helps me to write well?
- How can I improve my writing?

Teachers also teach students to ask metacognitive questions as they develop a shared language for talk about writing:

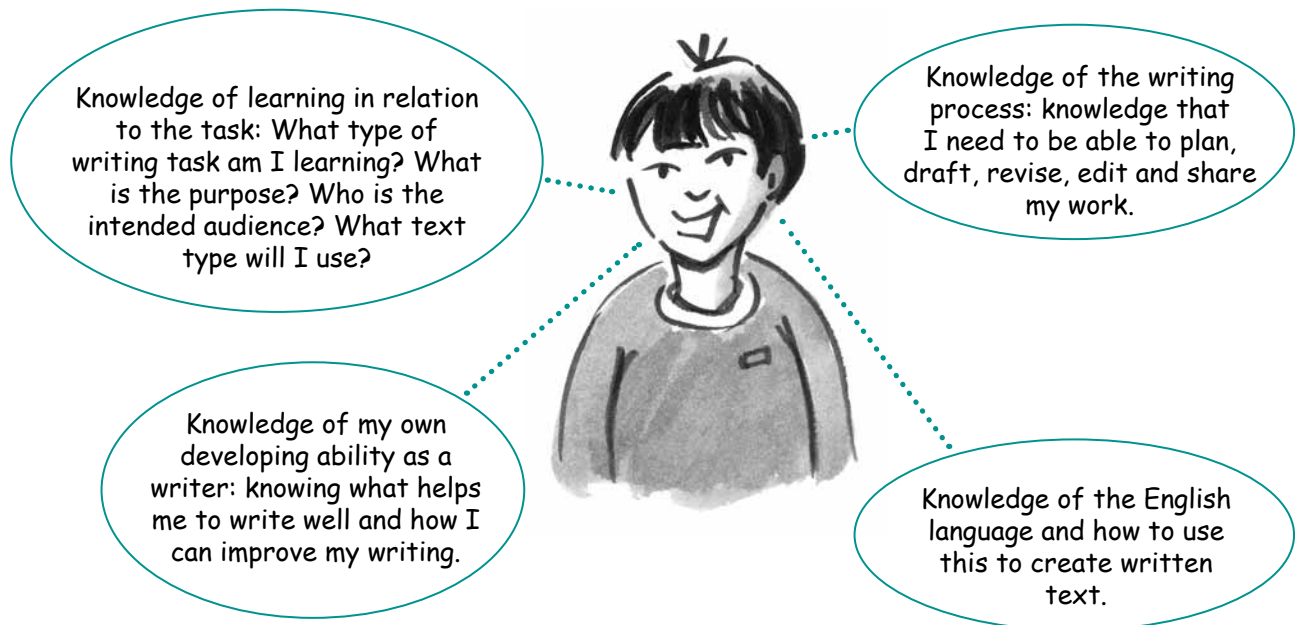
- Why am I writing this? Who am I writing this for? What kind of writing is this?
- What information do I need to be able to write? How will I plan to use this information effectively (e.g. graphic organisers, writing frames)?
- Why have I made this decision? Why have I chosen this word/phrase/form of sentence? What are the alternatives?
- What have I learned about my writing? What have I learned from my writing? How did I learn this? What was difficult? Why was this difficult? What did I do well? What are my future targets? What will help me reach these?

On Graphic organiser 1 (see *Developing effective writing instruction: Graphic organiser 1*), students are asked to record their ideas about what learning is—and about what learning in writing is. This can be completed as a group or individual activity and can be added to over the course of several weeks. Teachers may wish to have students date and use a different coloured pen for each entry, thus providing a cumulative record of shifts in knowing and understanding about writing.

Students as active participants in their own learning

Skilled and proficient writers think about, record and communicate experiences, ideas and information to meet specific learning purposes. They:

- develop their ability to encode words accurately
- possess a wide vocabulary and word knowledge that they can draw on as they write
- use appropriate punctuation and grammar to create fluent and accurate writing
- develop knowledge and control of the process of writing—planning, crafting to compose text, reflecting and re-crafting in the process of reviewing and presenting writing
- know and control a range of strategies and skills to create text for a range of purposes and audiences.



Teaching writing processes, strategies and skills is long term

Students become skilled and proficient when writing instruction is explicitly planned, based on student learning needs and curriculum outcomes to ensure that skill and proficiency increases over time. Therefore, it is

best to introduce a few writing processes, strategies and skills at a time, with significant opportunities for students to learn from observation and demonstration, scaffolded and guided practice, explanation and discussion. Additionally, writing processes, strategies and skills need to be modelled and practised throughout the day and across a range of curriculum areas.

As students develop confidence and competence, they are able to move from guided practise to independent use of newly acquired processes, skills and strategies. Direct explanation and modelling by the teacher in small group, larger group and one-to-one learning situations is effective in providing students with information on how and when to use writing strategies and how learning to use these will help them to become skilled and proficient writers. Instruction of this type provides multiple and varied opportunities to practise self-regulatory skills. Students benefit most when there are extensive and recursive opportunities to apply learning from guided practice to independent use, with additional support provided for those who need it. Most importantly, students learn to model and explain their use of writing processes, strategies and skills to each other and know how to continue to use these independently when they are writing on their own. Multiple opportunities to write make explicit, and allow for internalisation of, the features of an 'expert' student writer.

Writing strategies include:

- to create a visual image for readers
- to help readers link to their prior knowledge
- to lead readers to predict
- to infer
- to summarise ideas
- to evaluate
- to retell
- to clarify.

Writing skills include:

- encoding words
- spelling strategies
- spelling rules
- personal and high-frequency words
- vocabulary selection
- handwriting
- references
- punctuation.

Embedding formative assessment practices

Formative assessment is the process of assessing and considering students' writing achievements, capability and expertise and using this information to inform subsequent teaching and learning. Formative assessment is generally defined as taking place during teaching with the express purpose of improving student learning. As such, it is integrated with instruction on

a daily basis (e.g. Black & Wiliam 1998; Clarke 2008; Davis 2007, 2011; Wiliam 2011).

In the context of writing instruction, formative assessment:

- takes place during all stages of the writing lesson
- is interactive in that it involves teachers and students in the process of determining what is known and what needs to be taught next
- is reflective in that it encourages teachers and students to look back to see what has been achieved, and how effectively this has been achieved
- influences what is taught next and the learning goals for student writing achievement.

Essentially, formative assessment in writing involves teachers and students in the process of:

Setting the scene for writing instruction by:

- developing a clearly articulated set of learning goals (based on the explicit needs of the students)
- sharing learning goals with students in such a way that they are clearly understood by each student
- providing success criteria to support the process of becoming a writer, e.g. what might be involved in the process of planning, personalising and self-regulating their writing
- providing exemplars that illustrate achievement—teachers and students discussing, analysing, co-constructing and sharing these as part of explicit needs-based instruction.

Gathering assessment information in writing through such processes as:

- teacher observation, anecdotal records, student–teacher conversations about writing, writing conferences
- involving students in self and peer assessment against the achievement criteria, writing exemplars, think-aloud and student demonstration and reflective discussion/questionnaires.

Analysing assessment information about writing through such processes as:

- writing assessment criteria
- development and use of writing exemplars
- self and peer review of writing teaching and learning
- comparing student progress and achievement over time.

Using assessment information to:

- provide high-quality feedback on student writing
- determine and set learning goals for future writing instruction
- promote and enhance teacher and student self-reflection
- review effectiveness of instruction in relation to student learning needs.

These processes do not occur in isolation and they are not linear, but recursive and responsive to the needs and expectations of students and teachers.

Formative assessment has a number of components (Davis 2011). These include:

- establishing and sharing with students the learning goal(s) for the lesson
- establishing with students the success criteria for the lesson(s)
- providing students with direct and explicit feedback on their progress towards the lesson learning goal(s)
- deliberately including students in the process of reflecting on and reviewing their learning through
 - self and peer assessment
 - conferences with peers and teacher
 - giving and receiving feedback
 - setting and monitoring learning goals and the next steps for instruction.

For further information on formative assessment in this text, see *Chapter 2: Assessment information to inform teaching*, and examples in each subsequent chapter.

The importance of talk

Oral language is well known to be the foundation of literacy acquisition and critical to a student's success in both writing and reading. Talk encourages students to share, control and organise their ideas, to listen to and consider the views and ideas of others and to 'test' ideas for writing in preparation for a writing task. Talk enables students to develop their understanding of an idea, situation or event they will be writing about and ensures that all participants leave the group with a clearer idea of the task ahead. For students preparing to write and subsequently review and monitor their writing in preparation for others to read, talk helps to develop their inner speech and is a way of self-regulating writing (Haas Dyson 2010; Vygotsky 1962).

Furthermore, talk that is conversational in tone, rather than a series of teacher questions and student responses, is more effective in creating authentic and explicit talk about writing. During conversation, the teacher participates as a member of the group, scaffolding the conversation content, and the development of conversation skills as and when required. Productive talk that serves to enhance writing is structured and focused to maintain a high degree of student involvement but is not dominated by the teacher. This talk is collaborative and provides shared opportunities to co-construct learning.

Shared and collaborative opportunities to co-construct learning



Talk to develop understanding of the writing task

Provide ample opportunities for students to talk about the writing task they will be undertaking. This includes opportunities to talk about the type of writing they will be doing, the structural and organisational features related to this type of text and the language often associated with this type of writing.

Example: Students are writing a narrative with three characters. They talk about what they know about a narrative, the structure most commonly used to write a narrative, the importance of setting and characters and how these develop alongside a problem that needs to be solved. The students talk about the narrative structure of a beginning, middle and end as a story is being developed. Furthermore, opportunities are planned and executed to enable students to talk to clarify and use instructional and academic language associated with the writing task.

Talk to express ideas and learn from the experiences of others

Allow students to be involved in talk through which they share and explore their own knowledge and experiences in relation to writing and to the topic or context they will be writing about. This talk should reflect and respect cultural and social diversity, and link writing and writing tasks to cultural and personal experiences.

Example: Students share examples of how writing is used in cultural celebrations. They use conversation and the sharing of ideas as a basis for writing about a special cultural celebration they have been involved in. Alternatively, students write a recount or report about an experience shared by another person in their class or group.

Talk in preparation for writing

In preparation for writing, allow students a range of opportunities to talk with others—in pairs, small groups and as part of a larger group—in order to develop and synthesise ideas for writing. This is particularly important for developing rich content knowledge, for exploring problems or topics that students may be writing about and to assist students to ‘think ahead’ about the text they will be composing. It is also important for students to talk in order to develop language for writing. This may include the discussion and development of subject-specific vocabulary, academic vocabulary, strong verbs, and adjectival and adverbial phrases that may be used in the process of composing their text.

Example: Students begin by discussing with a partner the key ideas they have for writing. They then join up with two other pairs to form groups of six students who share their ideas, ask and answer questions of each other and give each other feedback on the clarity of ideas shared.

Talk to reflect on thinking and learning

Reflective oral language opportunities help students to talk about their own learning, creating a climate of trust and a commitment to learning in a classroom. They also help students develop confidence to take risks with their own learning. When students create and participate in opportunities for reflective talk, they learn to describe and monitor their own learning and understanding of the processes, strategies and skills of writing and create opportunities for elaboration, explanation, justification and demonstration of learning. The talk-aloud and think-aloud approaches described below are examples of reflective, goal-focused talk.

The talk-aloud approach

This approach is used by early and developing writers as the first stage of describing the thinking that occurs as they engage in the writing process. It requires the students to talk aloud about what they are thinking as they plan, write and revise.

Prompts teachers can use to help develop the talk-aloud approach include:

- ‘Talk about what you are thinking as you prepare to write.’
- ‘Talk about what you are thinking as you decide what to write and select the words and sentences that best tell your story.’
- ‘Talk about what you know about your character.’
- ‘Tell me more about your setting and the problem you are developing.’
- ‘Talk about the main idea you want your reader to understand.’

The think-aloud approach

In this approach, students are asked to think aloud as they write, i.e. to explain what they are thinking as they prepare for, compose and revise

their text. In order to do this, students need to be able to talk about and describe the cognitive and metacognitive processes they go through as they create text.

As students develop their confidence in learning to think aloud as a way of composing text and self-regulating their own writing, they learn to stop periodically, reflect on the decisions they are making and talk about the writing processes, skills and strategies they are using and why. Students also learn to explain their thinking and provide a rationale for the choices they make—the language, structures and organisational features they choose to create meaning.

Example 1: The teacher demonstrates the use of think-aloud for descriptive paragraph writing:

- ‘When I think about what I will write, I try to get a visual image of the item I am describing. I examine the image I see and ask myself: What does it look like? What size is it? What shape is it? What colour is it? Then I answer my questions and record the ideas as notes to use in my description.’

Example 2: The teacher demonstrates the use of think-aloud for composing a sentence when writing an opinion:

- ‘When I am planning to write a sentence that will inform others of my opinion, I start by thinking about what I want to say and the words I want to use. Then I say the sentence to myself in my head. Next, I ask myself: Did my sentence make sense? Did I say what I wanted to say? Was this the best sentence I could use?’

Prompts teachers can use to develop the think-aloud approach include:

- ‘Tell me more about what you are thinking as you write this.’
- ‘Keep talking about what you are thinking as you plan for your writing.’
- ‘Say out loud the thoughts that come in to your mind as you review what you have written.’
- ‘Explain the changes you are choosing to make to your writing and the reasons for this.’
- ‘Tell me why you chose this word/phrase/subheading/diagram.’
- ‘Tell me why you chose this writing strategy.’
- ‘Explain why you thought it was important to include this information in your text.’
- ‘Tell me how you approached this writing task—why did you make the choices you did?’

Specific examples of student talk related to writing development, processes, strategies and skills, and the ability to self-regulate learning, can be found in each of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter summary

What does thought-provoking, engaging and challenging writing instruction 'look like' for students?



This chapter has provided an introduction and an overview of the critical factors in developing effective and metacognitively rich and varied instructional writing programs. The next chapter discusses and describes the collection, analysis and use of writing assessment information and explains how this can be used effectively in developing responsive and needs-based writing instruction.

