

What makes children WANT TO WRITE?

If it's always you dictating the topic for pupils' writing, you may never see the powerful results of letting them express what really matters to them

I recently had the privilege of reading a piece written during lockdown by a Year 4 girl. Her teacher had involved the children in a writing project in which he invited them, over 10 writing sessions, to craft a biography about a close family member or someone from the immediate community. The girl's piece was about her father, who had died two years previously, and she was moved to write it both in memory of and in homage to him. She wrote it for herself, for her family, and for the friends and teachers whom she trusted and of whose appreciation and sympathetic interest she was assured. It was engaged writing, infused with feeling and written in her

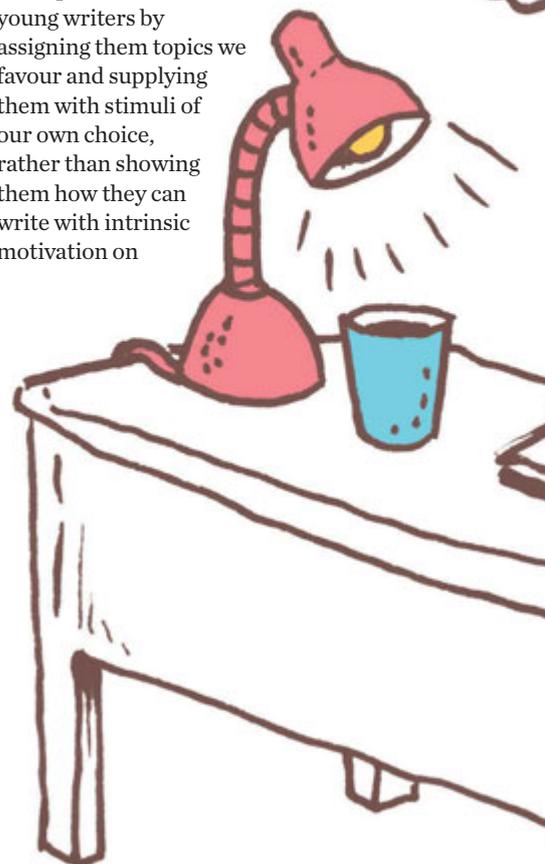
own clear voice. Her closing words were: "As you can see, my dad was an amazing, kind, honest person who made me the person I am today." And as her teacher rightly said, in writing her dad's personal journey, she was writing her own.

There are many reasons why we are compelled to write because of an urge or fundamental need. In our book *Real-World Writers*, we consider how being moved to write can and should drive children's writing in school. They may, for example, be moved to teach others by sharing their experience or particular knowledge of something. Perhaps they are moved by the desire to persuade or influence others, sharing their thoughts and opinions about a

topic and hoping to bring about change. They will sometimes be moved to entertain through the telling and writing of stories, both real and imagined, or simply be moved to paint with words, showing their artistry and creating images in their readers' minds to help them see things differently. Possibly they will be moved to reflect on a moment or passage from their own lives, or something recently learned, in order to better understand it. Or moved to make a record of an event which should not be forgotten by themselves or others. Writing because you are moved to do it presupposes that you are interested in your subject and have some kind of investment in it, and that you have in mind a clear and authentic purpose and a real audience for your writing. Having agency over your writing topic is therefore of huge importance.

Authentic writing projects

In the current high-stakes environment it is all too easy for us to lose sight of the reasons why children may feel moved to write. It seems that, as a result, we have forgotten how to give them the opportunity to be genuinely moved to do it. What so often happens is that we, as teachers, attempt to motivate our young writers by assigning them topics we favour and supplying them with stimuli of our own choice, rather than showing them how they can write with intrinsic motivation on



subjects they have selected themselves and with which they are authentically engaged. The result is that a class's written pieces can be lacklustre and depressingly similar to each other.

There is a way out of this situation, which hinges on the idea of why children write. Think about devising genre-based class writing projects which are authentic and purposeful. Teach craft knowledge and the typical features of the

genre, then show your children how to apply this to their own writing ideas. The results will be striking. For example, in one information project children wrote to

teach each other about things in which they were in some way expert, topics as

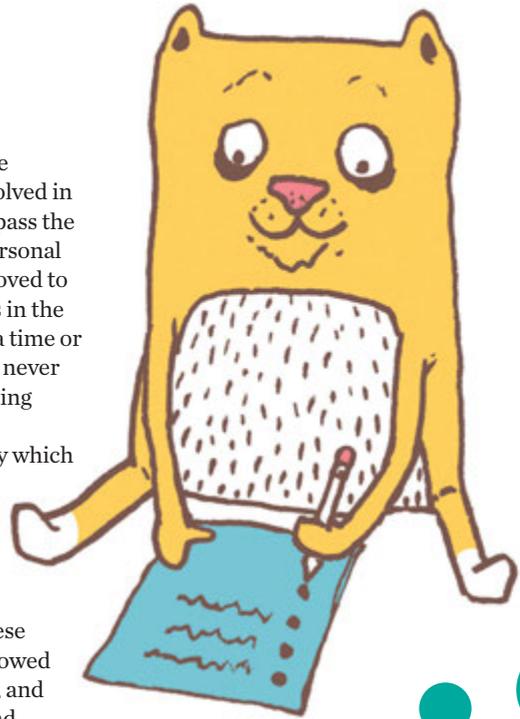
various as girls' skateboarding, the Chinese Dynasty, the physics involved in the workings of a lift, and how to pass the London Taxi Drivers' test. In a personal memoir project, children were moved to write about and share with others in the class their personal experiences, a time or a moment in their life they would never forget – sad, happy or funny. Writing advocacy journalism, they chose individually to champion a charity which had significance for them or their family. This project gave them the means of expressing their support for an organisation seeking to make a particular improvement or change. In all these projects, agency over the topic allowed the children to be moved to write, and ultimately to produce personal and committed pieces.

Seeking out motivation

Make it possible for children to find their own motivation and their own reason to write, and you and they will reap rewards. You'll find they will write with more 'flow', concentration, persistence and pleasure. You won't receive 30 identical texts; each one will be unique. The writing will be significantly improved and better organised because you've also taught them how to do it. Not surprisingly, research will tell you that true motivation has a very positive effect on feelings of wellbeing, self-confidence, self-worth, and, in this case, writer-identity. Thus, as our book says, if children aren't moved to write, you've got a problem. But by showing them how to discover the things they are moved by, you will be allowing them to find the motivation to write to a high standard all the way through to publication. What's more, they will write to say what they really mean, and also to show who they really are.



Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson are the founders of The Writing For Pleasure Centre. You can order their book 'Real-World Writers: a guide to teaching writing with 7-11 year olds' from routledge.com



How we get it wong

There are so many ways to put children off writing, but here are six of the prime culprits:

- Never allow children to choose their own topic, make their own writerly decisions and therefore be self-motivated.
- Assume the topic you choose to assign will motivate all children. It won't, and the writing will only have short-term value. Also, don't assign a topic children know little about.
- Fail to teach them craft knowledge and self-regulation strategies.
- In non-fiction writing, don't allow them to use their own voice or respond personally to the topic.
- Assign a writing topic which has neither purpose nor a clearly defined audience who will receive the published piece at the project's end.
- Convey to the children that you are primarily interested in evaluating their piece and are not really interested in what it is they have to say.