Writing for a purpose means writing for real. It’s reasonable to assume that every act of writing undertaken out in the world is underpinned by a reason to write it. Yet although we know from research that children take greater pleasure in writing for a purpose, and this in turn means they write better texts, it appears we often don’t think of bringing authentic purposes into the writing classroom.

The whole issue of what could make writing authentic in school, including what a real purpose and audience for writing would look like, is well worth thinking about. Research studies on the subject express a broad but compelling consensus of opinion, agreeing that, to be authentic, a writing project must connect both with children’s own lives and with how and why writing is undertaken in the world outside the school gates.

Who gets to choose?
The serious barrier to children having the opportunity to write with genuine purpose and for a genuine audience is that decisions about the genre, the topic, the purpose and who it is being written for are almost always made by the teacher, who then assigns the project to the children to complete. Projects are often harnessed, in what seems to be quite an arbitrary way in terms of the teaching of writing, to a current topic or to the particular class novel under study.

Teacher-chosen audiences and purposes are typically artificial and manufactured, having little or no connection to purposes and audiences in the real world, which means, bizarrely, that children are effectively being asked to pretend at writing. This may happen particularly in a literature-based approach to teaching writing: for example, children might be asked to write a letter to a book character, or a newspaper article about a dragon’s egg appearing in the playground or about the day the chairs all left the classroom and
how they must be persuaded by letter to return. Such projects may seem seductively attractive and motivating on the surface, but they will have only a short-lived effect on children’s development as writers. You could say it’s rather like experiencing a sugar rush – high energy, but only for a brief space of time. And, in the context of assigning a writing ‘task’ attached to a topic, teachers inevitably find themselves receiving 30 very similar versions of, for example, a biography of Queen Victoria, or the much-favoured newspaper article about the opening of Tutankhamun’s tomb, written for no purpose other than to have children repeat the given information, and with no defined audience beyond themselves and therefore no reason to be published. Hence the inauthenticity of so many writing projects.

How to create real purpose

However, we can avoid this scenario because, in actual fact, it’s easy to create authentic and motivating projects with a real purpose and audience by the simple expedient of setting a genre as a parameter for writing, discussing for whom the piece is being written, and then giving children agency over their own writing topic.

If children have been taught idea generation techniques, they can learn about the conventions of the genre for the class writing project and then go on to choose what they want to write about, using their own funds of knowledge and identifying their own genuine purposes and audiences. To give some simple examples:

- write an information text, but choose a subject you know a lot about and which you think others would be interested to learn about too;
- write a persuasive letter to someone in the community who might have the power to act on your request;
- or, in a narrative genre, generate your own playful or imaginative idea and write it as a story, poem or as a piece of ‘faction’, with the aim of entertaining readers and showing your artistry by painting with words.

These reasons to write do, of course, mirror real-world writing purposes, and the writing that springs from them is as authentic as the writing that takes place in the world outside school.

In summary, writing in school can be undertaken with genuine purpose if it matches the reasons why writers write in the outside world; if the topic is chosen by the child and is therefore relevant to their own lives; if it can be published and put to work in the world as entertainment, as a record, as an opinion or an attempt to influence, as a reflection or as an explanation about something. It will have an authentic outcome only if it has a real envisioned audience which may be close or distant, known or unknown, but is certainly not Dumbledore, a collection of chairs, or Paddington Bear. Nor is it the teacher, whose own purpose is primarily to read the writing for evaluation or assessment.

If genre is taught well in class writing projects and children are allowed to write authentically, finding their own reasons for writing and using the genre for their own purposes and in their own way, they will be experiencing a sincere curriculum which simultaneously attends to their emotional needs as young writers and fulfils official objectives. They will also be part of a process which not only helps them write better texts but gives them the opportunity to write for real, with purpose, power and pleasure.

“*A genuine audience is certainly not Dumbledore, a collection of chairs, or Paddington Bear*”

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**TEACHING TECHNIQUES**

**REASONS TO WRITE**

If authenticity means not pretending, then we should remember to:

- Give children a say in deciding on the purpose and audience for a writing project in a particular genre. As a class, have an ‘ideas party’ – collect ideas on flipchart paper for what they would like to write about and to whom, and then collaboratively agree on both.

- Alternatively, set a genre as the parameter and then give children individual agency over the writing topic. Teach idea generation techniques to help them find their own topic and then take a ‘writing register’.

- Let children use their own funds of knowledge and identity in their writing in school. They need to write their own worlds and express who they are.

- Give children the chance to find reasons to be moved to write, and be who they want to be in their piece – maybe entertainers, biographers, poets, storytellers, teachers or advisers. Show them how they can mix elements of different genres together to do this.

- Ensure that the mentor texts you provide include authentic and legitimate examples from the world outside school.

- Make discussions about publishing possibilities an initial and important part of a class writing project.

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