

How Important Is Talk For Writing?



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Writing floats on a sea of talk

- James Britton

How important is the role of talk in children's writing development? Case studies of the best performing writing teachers would argue that it is transformative (Pressley et al. [1997](#); Medwell et al. [1998](#); Langer [2001](#); Gadd & Parr [2017](#); Young [2019](#)). A child's writing and their language development mutually benefit when they are invited to craft writing amongst their teacher and peers every single day. Indeed, engaging in daily and meaningful talk and writing is one of the best ways to develop children's language (Mercer et al. [1999](#); Rojas-Drummond et al. [2008](#); Green et al. [2008](#); Parr et al. [2009](#); Fisher et al. [2010](#); Dix [2016](#); Reedy & Bearne [2021](#)).

Encouraging children to talk and collaborate together during writing time is an evidence-based research recommendation (Graham et al. [2012](#); Grossman et al. [2013](#); De Smedt & Van Keer [2014](#)) and an opportunity to talk as they write improves children's final written outcomes (McQuitty [2014](#)). For example, children who talk as they write go on to write richer and more sophisticated texts (Wiseman [2003](#); Vass et al. [2008](#)). This may be because talk gives children more working memory for writing (Latham [2002](#); Cremin & Myhill [2012](#); Young & Ferguson [2021](#)) or because talk between children assists them in deciding what to say and how to encode it (Davidson [2007](#); Whittick [2020](#)).

A classroom rich in talk, where children are encouraged to tell others about events in their own lives, the knowledge they bring into school, and the imaginative ideas their minds conjure up is the foundation of any high-quality writing program (Lamme et al. [2002](#); Tolentino [2013](#); Daniels [2014](#); Rowe [2018](#); Young & Ferguson [2020](#), [2021](#)). Your class can have more stories and ideas for writing than you'll ever know what to do with as long as you're willing to give time for talking and sharing. Children regularly rely on talk for guidance, a model, expertise, assistance, and instruction (Wohlwend [2008](#); Kissel [2009](#)). This isn't a negative thing as it shows children's commitment to being independent through what's called co-regulation (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

Children talk their texts into being. Talk is vital at all parts of a young writer's process. Firstly, talking with peers helps children generate ideas for what it is they want to write about. Talk also supports pupils to plan what it is they want to write down. It helps them draft fluently, to revise, and to proofread with a readership in mind. Finally, talk is an opportunity to publish or perform for others (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

Children talk with one another before they write, as they write and after they write. These interactions occur in different ways and can include:

- **Idea explaining** Children share what they plan to write about during the session with others.
- **Idea sharing** Children work in pairs or small 'clusters' to co-construct their own texts together.
- **Idea spreading** One pupil mentions an idea to their group. Children then leapfrog on the idea and create their own texts in response too.
- **Supplementary ideas** Children hear about a child's idea, like it, and incorporate it into the text they are already writing.
- **Communal text rehearsal** Children say out loud what they are about to write - others listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Personal text rehearsal** Children talk to themselves about what they are about to write down. This may include encoding individual words aloud. Other children might listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Text checking** Children tell or read back what they've written so far and others listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Performance** Children share their texts with each other as an act of celebration and publication.

(Young & Ferguson *in press*)

Through our own talk with pupils during writing time, we teach children how to respond to other's writing, ask questions, and how to give advice and instruction. Children begin to copy us. By hearing and participating in pupil-conferences, children become sociable and knowledgeable writer-teachers too (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)).

This article looks to highlight the importance of talk in writing. Children can write all the words they can say. However, if we put words in children's mouths, they end up not as writers but reciters. Duplicators of someone else's voice. If we want to develop children's language and writing alongside each other, we must give them time to talk and write together everyday. We must keep in mind that dictating and reciting texts isn't talking or writing. Dictation and recitation are practices associated with a presentational-skills (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)) or 'writing readiness' (Young [2021](#)) ideology towards early writing development. Both of which are fundamentally flawed.

Neither scientific research nor the case studies of the best performing writing teachers recommend the slavish and repetitive learning of a text. It's not in children's best interests to spend their time engaged in long-winded 'barking out of a text'. Instead, we must put talk and language development where it belongs - at the heart of the writing process.

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