

Developing Children's Talk For Writing



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Language, quite simply, is a window through which we can reach out and touch each other's minds. Anyone can reach through it... It is the most intimate act we can ever perform. We must be sure, always, to keep that window open

- Gerry Altmann

Early talk

In a previous [blog-post](#), we looked at how important talk is for children's writing development. This article continues the conversation by looking at what the research says about how we can develop it. First, let's define what we mean and then consider how much speech and language learning takes place before children enter formal schooling.

Talking	The ability to express one's own thoughts and feelings.
Reciting	Repeating aloud a text from memory.
Writing	The activity or occupation of composing text for publication.
Dictating	The transcription of someone else's spoken text.
Developing children's language	The development of children's own communication using speech and/or writing.

Age	Typical language milestones
Eighteen months old	At eighteen months old, children already have a vocabulary of around fifty words.
Two years old	By two years old, most children produce utterances of two words. These utterances are crafted by the child and are not the parroting back of an adult model. Speech and thought come together by the age of two.
Two and a half	Can utter sentences of three words.
Between three and four years olds	Begin speaking in full sentences. Children can say an infinite number of original sentences - sentences that they've never said or heard before.

Five years old	Children are able to use language with a capacity close to that of an adult. For example they use language for the following purposes: to persuade, influence or command others; to share and understand information; to tell stories (both real and imagined) and use language imaginatively and playfully. Children can typically say and write sentences of around five words.
From seven years old	Children usually acquire a full and accurate knowledge of their first language.

(Taken from Halliday [1969](#); Bancroft [1995](#); Latham [2002](#))

As you can see, every single child brings a great deal of language learning into the classroom on their very first day of school. However, this learning can often be underestimated or overlooked by many who work in education (Avineri et al. [2015](#); Sperry et al. [2019](#); Burnett et al. [2020](#)). Research also shows that children are most likely to succeed in schools that use and value this existing knowledge and build on it (Johnson [2015](#); McQuillan [2019](#)).

Developing children's talk for writing

If you can help your students regard their inner [or outer] speech as something they can in some edited form transcribe any time to paper, they will take a giant step toward becoming fluent writers

- Moffett & Wagner (1992)

Children's development as talkers relies on 'a conversational context'. Children's language develops when they are given the cognitive responsibility to use it. Ultimately, children must be the ones to construct their own speech and writing. Otherwise, they learn little (Latham [2002](#); Timperley & Parr [2009](#); Chuy et al. [2011](#); Avineri et al. [2015](#); Allal [2019](#)). The acquisition of language is a dynamic and creative process, not the passive reciting and copying of someone else's model.

Children's talk and writing should be developed concurrently. Children must engage in **egocentric talk**, talking aloud to themselves as they write. They also need to write alongside and in happy **dialogue** with their teacher and peers. This means it's necessary for children to play a daily and active role in their own talk and writing construction. They should also learn about speech and text construction from being 'overhearers' to their peers' talk, help and instruction. In addition, children can engage in what we call **parallel writing** and **co-operative writing**, where they participate daily in the kind of activities listed below:

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*)

Instruction and being a writer-teacher

Despite what we might think, young children pay close attention to the conventions of adult talk and writing. Teachers should therefore engage in ways that are explained in the table above during daily writing time too. This is best done through systematic and daily pupil-conferencing. See [our guide to pupil-conferencing with 3-11 year olds](#) for more details.

Develop children's talk for writing through explicit instruction, not through recite for writing activities

The problem with a lot of writing programs is that there isn't enough talk nor is there enough writing taking place each day. Talk involves creating something for others to understand. Writing also involves creating something for others to understand. To develop writers, we must develop talkers. This is because what children learn by speaking, they use as a resource for writing (Harste [2012](#)). The Writing For Pleasure Centre's recent publication [Big Book Of Writing Mini-Lessons For 3-11 Year Olds](#) provides lessons to help teachers do just that. It's about teaching children the strategies of talk for writing and inviting them to use those strategies during that day's writing time. For example:

- *Tell it if you can't read it*
- *How to write in collaboration*
- *How to share your writing with a friend*
- *How to respond to your friend's writing*
- *Collecting language - speech*
- *Can I copy you?*
- *Leapfrogging using a friend's idea*
- *Talk about your topic...*
- *Tell your story...*
- *Go from sounds to letters*
- *Talk to yourself*
- *Pencil microphone - say it then write it*
- *Whisper your sentence, hold it, and keep it*
- *Think, say, write*
- *Make a page - share a page*
- *Write a little - share a little*
- *Well, what do you want to say next?*
- *Go back and wake your writing up!*
- *Give your writing a tickle*

These strategies then become internalised and children apply them with automaticity.

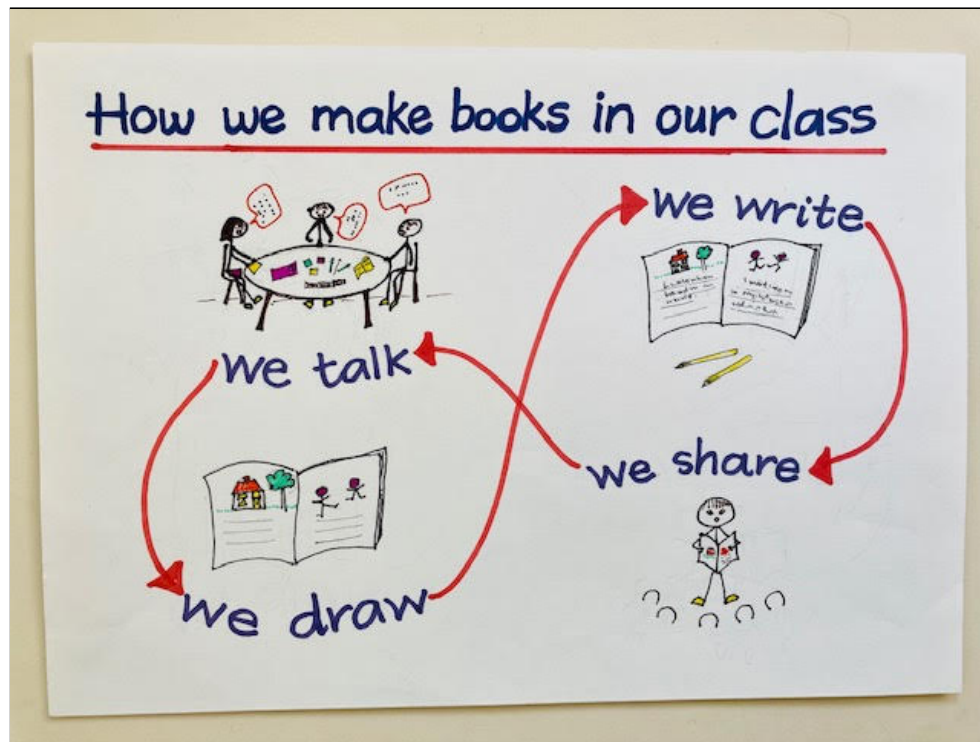
Talk to support children's encoding

Back to **egocentric talk**, it takes a lot of working memory for children to take the phonemes of their speech and present them as graphemes of written language; otherwise called encoding. Encoding, fluency and automaticity in writing can only really come if children are 'talking aloud to themselves' and writing meaningfully and for a sustained period every day. Until that happens, children are relying on their working memory which leaves them with little space to consider the more complex compositional and transcriptional aspects of writing. As a result, their academic progress suffers (Louden et al. [2005](#); Harste [2012](#); Graham et al. [2012](#); Ouellette & Sénéchal [2017](#); Rowe [2018](#)). We want encoding to be

stored in their long-term memory as quickly as possible. This is another reason why children simply must talk and write every single day.

Talking, cognition and writing

In terms of cognitive development, if children aren't speaking enough, then they aren't really thinking enough. This is because much of their thinking is inextricably linked with speaking (Latham [2002](#)). Therefore, growth in talk, writing and cognition can either be facilitated and enhanced or limited and deprived by the sorts of writing programs we choose to use in our classrooms. If children aren't speaking enough, their progress is likely to be limited. The way in which cognition, talk and writing are enhanced is by having children engage in genuine language use - genuine talk before, during and after writing. We see this quite clearly in the typical writers' process for children in the EYFS:



An example of the writing processes for an EYFS classroom.

In summary, the best writing classrooms are ones where children and their teacher are talking and writing with one another every day. Children talk before, during and after writing and the teacher talks before, during and after writing too. Teachers do this by delivering valuable daily writing instruction (Young et al. [2021](#)), providing individualised instruction through pupil-conferencing (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)) and by role-modelling writers' talk by being a writer-teacher amongst their pupils as they write (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

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