

4 Writing

The question of when to start teaching children to write in English is closely linked to that of when to start teaching them to read. Similar criteria apply:

- How well can the children read and write in their own language?
- Do they need to be able to write in English at this stage?
- Do they know the Latin script?
- Do they show an interest in writing?
- Will the English spelling system interfere seriously with what they are learning in their own language?
- Are you going to ask them to copy or to be creative?
- To write words, sentences, or stories?

In general, it is best to introduce English through listening and speaking first, then reading, and writing last. It is important to evaluate the needs and abilities of your own children.

For young children, pictures are very important. Ask them to draw a picture first (for example, 'What I did at the weekend'), and then to write a short caption for it. It is usual to ask them to copy words and short sentences first—to practise their handwriting as much as their English. These short sentences and words should reflect themes connected with the children's schoolwork or daily lives, and be linked with pictures and posters around the room.

But writing is much more than the simple mechanics of getting the words down: it also involves being creative, spelling, grammar, punctuation, choice of appropriate words, sentence linking, and text construction; and, for older children, having ideas about content, and the ability to be self-critical and to edit their own work. The children learn some of these skills when they learn writing in their first language, but others have to be taught explicitly in the English class.

Correction

When you correct writing you are correcting two things: (1) the text itself: are the ideas good? Are they put together in a way which is easy to follow? and (2) is the English correct? A child might invent an excellent story but be unable to get it down in accurate English: it is essential to recognize and praise inventiveness as well as pointing out language mistakes.

Read the child's written work first for its content, if possible with the child at your side, so that you can make comments and talk

YOUNG LEARNERS

Sarah Phillips

about the story together. It is important to make children feel that you appreciate their work and are not simply looking for mistakes in their English.

With older children who can write confidently, point out major errors in the English and ask them to write the story again. With very advanced learners, don't correct the language, but ask them to try to think of the correct English.

If you want to display the children's work, you can ask them to write out a neat version.

4.1 Variations on a gap

LEVEL 2, 3

AGE GROUP B, C

TIME 15–30 minutes

AIMS **Linguistic:** vocabulary (adjectives, opposites) and word order.
Other: to stimulate the imagination.

DESCRIPTION The children fill in gaps in short English texts. The first variations are suitable for younger learners and beginners and then they increase in difficulty and the maturity required.

PREPARATION

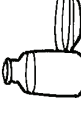
- 1 Prepare texts as explained in each activity.
- 2 Make copies for the children (at least one between two).

IN CLASS

Picture gaps

Choose a suitable text and rewrite it, substituting pictures for some of the words. The children should write the words, perhaps with the help of their picture dictionaries.

EXAMPLE

This is my . She eats .
_____ and drinks .

Adjective fill

Choose or write a description which has seven or eight adjectives in it that can easily be changed for others. The children read the description and draw a picture of it. Then they change the adjectives and draw a picture of their new description.

EXAMPLE

Jenny gets up (late). She drinks a (cold) cup of tea and eats some toast.
She goes to school in a (yellow) bus.

Opposites

Choose or write a text, including seven or eight words which have 'opposites'. Give the children a copy and ask them to write the opposites in the spaces by the original words.

EXAMPLE

An old witch lives in a (big) house in a wood. She has a (short) nose and (black) hair.

Other words

Choose or write a text about a very neutral person. It should contain some description and some action. Put the children in pairs or groups of three and tell them to change the text, imagining that the person is an animal—for example, a mouse, a lion, or a hippopotamus. When they have finished, let the children read each others' texts.

EXAMPLE

Mrs Williams is a teacher. She is tall and thin and has fair hair. Her favourite food is fish and chips.

Mrs Williams is a hippopotamus. She is short and fat and has grey hair. Her favourite food is grass.

No gaps

Choose or write a very basic text that contains no adjectives or adverbs. Give the children a copy and get them to put in adjectives and adverbs where they think suitable. This example is adapted from *Chatterbox 3*, page 52:

EXAMPLE

The Parthenon is a building in Athens. The Greeks built it 2,400 years ago. It is on a hill called the Acropolis. The Acropolis was the city of the kings in Athens.
Adjectives: Ancient big first beautiful

4.3 The chocolate cake

LEVEL	3
AGE GROUP	C
TIME	45 minutes

Linguistic: to practise writing spontaneously, listening to stories, reading a dialogue with correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation.

Other: to stimulate the children’s imagination.

The teacher tells the children a story that leads to an argument. When the story reaches a critical point the children continue writing who said what.

Pencils and paper.

Practise telling the story, using a colleague as ‘the class’ if possible. Use one of the story outlines below, or invent an appropriate story for your children.

THE CHOCOLATE CAKE

A story about Mark, his friend, his sister Sue, and his mother.
Sue’s birthday—mother made a beautiful chocolate cake—put in the fridge for Sue’s birthday party.

Mark and his friend came home from playing football—tired, dirty, and very hungry.

Opened fridge—saw cake—took a knife—cut a small slice each—ate it—delicious—another slice and another ...

Door opened—mother came in—boys had their mouths full—shut the fridge door.

The mother said ...

Mark said ...

His friend said ...

The mother said ...

Just then Sue came home.

Sue said ...

The boys said ...

The mother said ...

Sue said ...

4.2 The other day ...

LEVEL	2, 3
AGE GROUP	B, C
TIME	30 minutes

Linguistic: vocabulary, to learn how a story is constructed.
Other: to use the imagination.

The children write a story one line at a time, folding their papers over and passing them on after each sentence. The final story will be a nonsense story made up of several children’s sentences.

- 1 Read through the story in Worksheet 4.2 (see end of book) and adapt it for your class, or write a similar story yourself.
- 2 Make a copy of the story for each child.

- 1 Tell the children that they are going to write a story together.
- 2 Pre-teach or revise the vocabulary needed.

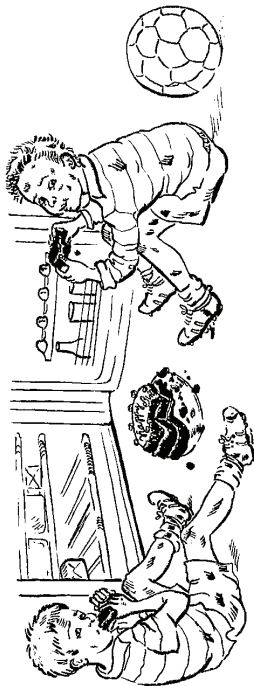
3 Give out the worksheets and show the children how to fold them over so that they can only see the first sentence. Then read the first sentence together and explain that they should write the end of the sentence, and then fold the paper over so that the next child cannot see what they have written, and pass it on.

4 Continue until they have completed all the sentences. Then put the children in groups of four or five and let them read one another’s stories and choose the one they like best. Then either they or you can read their favourite stories to the class.

Ask the children to illustrate their favourite stories and then make a class book of them. (See 8.11, ‘Making books’.)

Play ‘Consequences’ with older children. The stages of the story are:

..... [Boy] met (fold the page over)
..... [Girl] (fold).
He said: (fold).
She said: (fold).
And the consequence was



IN CLASS

- 1 Set up the situation and put the children in groups of four. Get them to decide who is going to be Mark, his friend, his mother, and his sister. Adapt the number of characters to suit your class. Make sure they all have pencils and that each 'mother' has a sheet of paper.
- 2 Tell the story. Remember to spend time describing the personalities of the characters and then to build up the suspense until you get to the point where the mother comes in.
- 3 At this point say *And the mother said ...*, and in a non-storytelling voice say *Now write what the mother said*. Give the 'mothers' a little time to think and write, and then say in your 'story' voice: *And Mark said* Tell them to pass the paper to 'Mark' so that he can write. Carry on until each character has written two or three lines.
- 4 The groups practise saying their dialogues. Check their pronunciation and encourage them to be as dramatic as possible. Each group performs to the rest of the class.

VARIATION

You can use any story with in-built conflict. The following example encourages imagination and creativity:

STORY OUTLINE

THE DRAGON

A story about two children and a dragon.
Two children had to walk through a dark wood to go to school.
Problem—the wood had a dangerous dragon in it.
The dragon was only frightened of one thing—a whistle.
The children always took a whistle—no problem.
Walking along peacefully—suddenly a terrible noise—the dragon!
'Give me the whistle'—looked in the bag—not there!
The dragon came closer.
The girl said ...
The boy said ...
The dragon said ...

Acknowledgement

I learned this technique from Pete Redpath.

4.4 Simple poems

2, 3

B, C

30 minutes

LEVEL

AGE GROUP

TIME

AIMS

Linguistic: to expand vocabulary, creative use of language, use of adjectives.

Other: to give the children a sense of achievement in the foreign language.

The children write very simple poems on a given theme, where each line is made up of an adjective and a noun.

Pencils and paper.

Prepare a short adjective-noun poem yourself or use the one below:

Summer

Hot days
Cold ice-cream
Yellow sand
Blue water
Big waves
Small fish.

IN CLASS

- 1 Write your poem on the board and then read it out loud to the class. Ask them if they can see the pattern of the lines and if they can add any more.
- 2 Tell them that they are going to write a similar poem, and either give them the topic or get the class to agree on one. The first time you do this activity it is a good idea to choose something that is very familiar, such as 'birthdays', or something tangible, such as 'outside the window'. Later you can use more abstract ideas like 'pollution', 'what makes me happy', or a visual stimulus such as a picture or sculpture.
- 3 Get the children to call out English words on the theme. Write them on the board and divide them into adjectives and nouns. (Put other words such as verbs to one side.) Show the children how to combine an adjective and a noun as in the example.
- 4 Tell them to write their own poems using the words on the board. You might like to put on some gentle music to create a quiet, thoughtful atmosphere.

5 Go round the class while the children are writing, encouraging and commenting on their work. When they are satisfied with their poems get them to write them out neatly. You can either display them on the classroom walls or make a class book of poems.

VARIATION 1

If you think this is too difficult for your children, you could give them a poem and get them to change some of the words in it (see 4.1, 'Variations on a gap', and 7.2, 'Poems, rhymes, and chants to say').

VARIATION 2

Instead of the adjective-noun combination, you could use a verb-adverb combination.

VARIATION 3

The children can write a counting poem from one to ten. Each line could be a noun-adjective combination or a complete sentence, for example:

In the garden

- One dog sleeping in the sun
- Two cats washing their ears
- Three children playing in the grass
- Four mothers drinking tea
- Five trees with green leaves
- Six butterflies flying in the sky
- Seven clothes on the line
- Eight birds in a tree
- Nine clouds full of rain
- Ten flowers with yellow heads.

4.5 Name poems

LEVEL

2, 3

AGE GROUP

B, C

TIME

30 minutes

AIMS

Linguistic: to expand vocabulary, creative use of language.
Other: to give the children a sense of achievement in the foreign language.

DESCRIPTION

The children write a very simple poem, based on the first letters of a chosen word, for example their name.

IN CLASS

1 Write the letters of your name on the board like this:

S A R A H

Ask the children to think of English words beginning with the letters. Make sure you get a variety of parts of speech—nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Then put a variety of 'little words' in a circle—for example, *a, the, and, with, on, in, at*.

S A R A H

- She and red heavy
- sit are read high
- swim animal rose help
- silly ant hot

a the but is has got

2 Get the children to help you choose words from the board to make up a short poem where each letter of your name begins a line. You could have just one word per line, or you could have longer lines, for example:

- She likes plants Sitting
- Animals And
- Red roses or Reading
- And Are her
- High places Hobbies

3 Now ask the children to do the same with their own names. The poems can be displayed on the walls.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Paula Vázquez for giving me the ideas for 4.4 and 4.5.

4.6 Story writing

LEVEL _____

AGE GROUP _____

TIME _____

AIMS _____

DESCRIPTION _____

MATERIALS _____

PREPARATION _____

IN CLASS _____

2, 3

B, C

30 minutes +

Linguistic: to write a short, cohesive text.
Other: to encourage creative writing and imagination.

The children write simple stories.

Pencils and paper, pictures, blu-tack (see individual activities).

See individual activities.

Following an example

1 Read or tell the children a simple story in English, for example *Where's Spot?* by Eric Hill or one of the story ideas in this book—see 1.2, 'The Frog family', 2.5, 'The Three Little Pigs', or 1.5, 'The Pied Piper'.

2 Ask the children to write a similar story, illustrate it, and perhaps make a book. (See 8.11, 'Making books'.)

Stories on a theme

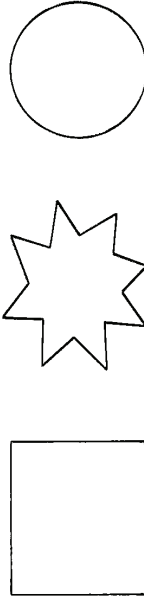
1 Choose a general theme—for example, 'Summer holidays', 'Parties', or 'Witches', and write it in the middle of the board.

2 Ask the children to draw pictures connected to the title and stick them up on the board.

3 When you have a boardful, put the children in groups of three or four and tell them to invent a story, using three or four of the pictures on the board.

Beginning, middle, and end

1 Draw three shapes like these on the board:



2 Tell the children that they are the beginning, the middle, and the end of a story. Ask them either to suggest words for each box, or to stick or draw a picture in each box.

3 Put the children in groups of three or four and get them to write a story using some words from each box.

Modern fairy stories

1 Tell the children a fairy story like 'Little Red Riding Hood' or 'The Three Little Pigs' (see 2.6).

2 The children write a modern version.

Stories from pictures and words

1 Find some pictures that make a story.

2 Put the pictures on the board one by one and ask the children for ideas and English words that go with each picture.

3 Then put the children in groups of three or four to write the story.

Writing speech bubbles

1 Find or draw a series of pictures showing two or more people.

2 Stick empty speech bubbles coming out of their mouths. Photocopy one for each pair of children.

3 The children write what they think the people are saying in the bubbles.

If you do not have access to a photocopier, give each speech bubble a number and stick the pictures around the classroom walls. The children write the numbers in their exercise books and write what the people are saying by each number. When they have finished writing, they can compare their ideas and perhaps write the best ones on the pictures.

Stories from pictures

1 Cut pictures out of magazines and give four or five to each group of three or four children.

2 Each group makes up a story which includes all their pictures.

COMMENTS

Story writing is the most relevant kind of writing for children. These ideas help to get children started on writing stories, although they do not provide an exhaustive guide to the process of teaching creative writing. See the introduction to this chapter for some tips, and the Further Reading section for more detailed advice.