

The sea of writing

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In this article Felicity and Ross describe how children can be helped to choose their own topics for writing within the writing curriculum, and the impact this has both on the writing and on the children themselves.

'Children want to write'

These wise words from Donald Graves (1983), teacher, writer and thinker, form the starting point for this article. It is well-known, and confirmed by research (Dyson 2003, Kress 1997) that very young children have an innate ability to choose their own writing topics with ease, even if they are only mark-making, so is it necessary to always provide older children with a stimulus from which to write in English lessons? This article proposes a number of classroom strategies based on the conviction that allowing children to choose their own topics has a positive impact on their orientation towards writing both in and out of school.

Teachers can show children how to 'mine' their lives for ideas they could and very well should write about and then help them place their own values and cultural reference points in the written genres they have learned.

'We can't give children rich lives, but we can give them the lens to appreciate the richness that is already there.'

Lucy Calkins (1998)

For example, a particular memoir composed in our class recalled the birth – and the 'sweet baby smell' – of twin brothers, concluding 'Now we are a real family'. Through writing an advocacy journalism piece, another pupil raised money for a charity which had directly helped him in early life. A third wrote a loving biography of a grandpa, who had just died, to be read out at the funeral. Another wrote about getting a much longed-for hamster – who almost escaped on the way home. Hardly trivial topics. An incident, a person, a preoccupation, an opinion, a question, a memory, a curiosity, a problem, a story – these are personal resources available to all children to draw on as valuable and valid subjects for writing in school. When children care about their topic, they bring an energy and a will to the writing. They want it to succeed. When given an element of choice, children in our class have:

- discovered an intrinsic motivation, which extends to writing for pleasure out of school
- developed writing independence
- through agency and motivation, achieved well
- felt that writing is 'about them' and not a response to someone else's wishes
- developed a personal writing voice and know how to use it

- seen their own lives validated as providing legitimate subjects for writing
- deepened relationships with their peers through being part of a real community of writers.

10 practical ways to help you find your own writing ideas

Sea of Writing Ideas

'When you write, ideas crazily spill from your head, tumble down your arm into your pen and out along the crisp white page. To us, the only way to see ideas is scribbling them down – but ideas are more than just words on a page. They are colourful, squirming, squiggly things that slide and slip through the nooks and crannies of your brain. Some of them crash against the walls of your head in roaring waves. Others come more slowly – each droplet of water a letter.

Once you gain control of the sea – the droplets make out your idea.'

Henry in Year 5

Henry's words capture the essence of the process of writing. He demonstrates his understanding eloquently and brings his ideas to life.

There are many ways for teachers to support children in the generation of their own ideas and develop choice within a balanced curriculum. These are successful strategies used in our classroom and they would be equally effective in any year group. Some are written as if talking to the young writers.

The Michael Rosen effect

He takes an ordinary moment and makes it extraordinary or memorable.

For example (Rosen 1985):

Who's been at the toothpaste? / I know some of you do it right / and you squeeze the tube from the bottom / and you roll up the tube as it gets used up, don't you? / But somebody, somebody here - you know who you are / you dig your thumb in / anywhere, anyhow / and you've turned that tube of toothpaste into a squashed sock.

His book *What is Poetry?* (Rosen 2016) is an invaluable resource for generating ideas for poetry writing, and the text can be shared with the class.

Ideas Hearts

Taken from Heard (1998), children write a raft of personal topics in the heart - loves, likes, people, places, games, food, hobbies, interests, books, films. This resource can be consulted and added to at any time. Teachers make and share their own hearts too.

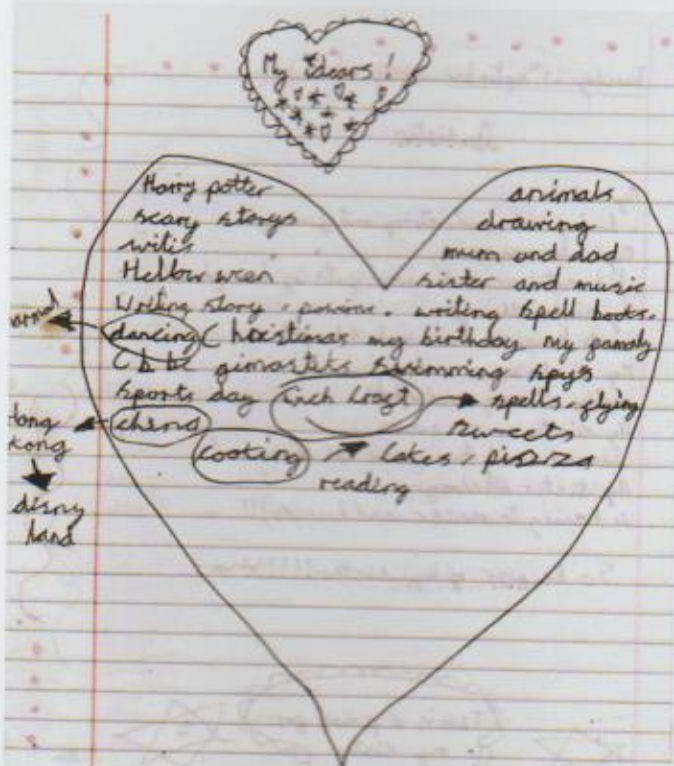


Figure 1: an example of an initial ideas heart by Edie, Year 4, which will be built upon in the course of the year. Note the searching for 'pebble moments' within larger topics. The analogy is with a whole beach of pebbles, from which you select one

Ask yourself questions

What if...? What would I do if...?

Roald Dahl famously came up with the idea for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2016) by simply writing this 'what if' question: 'What if a crazy man ran a chocolate factory?'

Write the beginning of a statement

When I was little...

I remember a day when...

Somewhere in the world today...

Feelings

What makes me happy, angry, scared, or excited?

Scratch an itch

Donald Murray (2002) said, 'Problems make good subjects'. Write a 'What itch needs scratching?' list of issues which need exploring, correcting, explaining and complaining about. Think of topics which make you furious, curious or simply confused.

Questions for memoirists

'Why memoir? It means the world becomes yours. If you don't do it, it drifts away and takes a whole piece of yourself with it... Memoir? It's like taking possession of your life, isn't it?'

Ted Hughes

Ask yourself these questions taken from Nancie Atwell's *Lessons That Change Writers* (2002):

- What are my earliest memories? How far back can I remember?
- What's the most important thing that has happened in my life so far?
- What have I seen that I can't forget?
- What's an event that changed how I feel about something?
- What's a time or place when/where I was perfectly happy?
- What's a time when it felt as if my heart were breaking?
- What's a time with a (grand)parent/carer/ brother or sister I'll never forget?
- Can I remember a time I learned to do something for the first time?

Take and use ideas or themes from books you have read and enjoyed independently or films you have chosen to watch

This is not the same as a single writing task, which everyone fulfils, based on a particular class book. A line from a song lyric can spark an idea, or you can write an 'inspired by...' piece based on a poem you have heard or found and liked in the class book-stock. Sharon Creech's book *Love that Dog* (2001) is precisely about that - the power of being inspired. Try writing 'fan-fiction', creating a new story around a character from an original work of fiction.

Use foundation subjects as inspiration

Write about your own responses to a topic. Raise questions which have interested you and explore them in any way you like - accounting for, explaining, debating, recounting - in poems and as stories. Write from your own perspective and bring personal significance to the writing. You will be learning to write and writing to learn in the same way as scientists, geographers and historians do in the real world.

Favourite objects

Draw or bring in a favourite object, picture or photograph from home. Choose a genre in which to write about it - as memoir, information, historical, scientific, or geographical account or investigation, as poem or story.

Concluding thoughts

If children care about their theme and know how to place it in their chosen genre, and if the writing process is explicitly taught, modelled and scaffolded, their writing achieves an authenticity and a life which is not always evident in teacher-led pieces. Children will need time and space for the incubation of their writing ideas and not every chosen topic

will prove to be 'hot', but this should not be a problem, since it also happens with writing in the real world.

The opportunity to choose invites children to write about what they wish to communicate with engagement and interest, for a purpose and an audience of their own choosing and in a (learned) genre which suits their intention.

The children in our class are intent on writing, and they love choosing their own topics - they have said so many times. They give us a wide variety of pieces ranging across many themes and forms. We have learned how to hone our gymnastic skills. We know why Old Trafford was closed only once in its history. We have discovered how to breed a Snoglebog, have shared the joys of a breakfast bacon and egg roll, rap-style and have read about the true life and untimely death of Superglue, a truly remarkable duckling.

As a little community of writers and readers, we got great pleasure from reading every piece, observing the children writing from the heart and developing their own 'sea of writing ideas'.

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Website

Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson run the website [Literacy For Pleasure](#) and organise the Twitter account [@WritingRocks_17](#).

SUPERGLUE

I was desperately sitting in front of the incubator watching the duck eggs. Although I knew they weren't ready to hatch, I still sat there waiting.

One afternoon, when I came back from school, my dad told me one of the duck eggs had started hatching. I was so excited until... I found out it was about two or three weeks early. My parents had to superglue it together. We all thought it wouldn't hatch but we were wrong. We all knew that if it hatched the duck lurking inside would be called Superglue.

Soon, the ducks started poking their tiny, orange beaks out of their little turquoise house. First to hatch was an adorable little male duck, who we called Gamima (at the time we thought he was a female). The second one to hatch was small compared to Gamima. We called her Daffy. Over the course of the next few days, the other eggs started to hatch - all of them except Superglue.

Finally, his egg started to form a lightning bolt across the top and a small beak pecked its way through the shell. As soon as I laid my eyes on him I knew he was my favourite. In some way he was the most special. He was a small pile of adorable, yellow fluff and I loved him dearly.

Soon, I and the rest of my family were allowed to hold the ducks. It was the most amazing experience I had ever had. They had the beautiful shape and were too soft to describe! They closed their eyes when you stroked them and leant their head to my body. As I stroked their head, I felt their soft skull beneath their warm feathery skin. They were so light they could fall over if a light breeze hit them. Their tiny webbed feet gripped to my relaxed fingers.

That weekend it was time for the ducks to have their first adventure outside. It was a beautiful, hot summer's day and the blazing sun shone over our garden. Daisies had started sprouting from the grass and apples were hanging from our small apple tree. The ducks were all so happy. After an hour outside, it was time for the ducks to go back into the house. My dad scooped up six of the ducks and took them inside. The only one left was Superglue who was wandering around in the garden. Me, my mum and my brother were watching him. The minute we turned our backs away, there was the sound of a faint quacking and a fox running. A fox had Superglue in his mouth. When my dad tried to catch the fox, it ran out of the garden and disappeared. Superglue was gone forever.

by Emily in Year 5 - a memoir