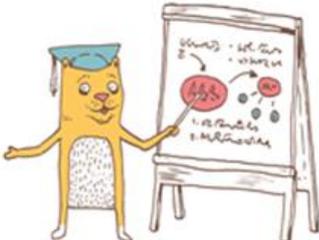
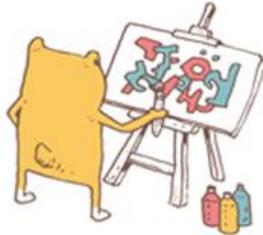
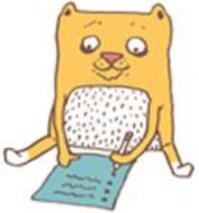


A Love Letter To Genre Teaching



After school one day in 2016, I scribbled the following into my notebook: *when we shape our writing curriculum around genres, we give children access to the world and to the fundamental reasons we are all moved to write.* For the past couple of years, I had been experimenting with the idea of merging three popular writing approaches, namely: genre teaching, writing workshop and a community of writers approach (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)). The statement above was clearly a eureka moment, where everything started to fall into place. This little note went on to become an epigraph in the book I published with my colleague Felicity Ferguson. It's a summary of our writing approach, an approach we've called [Real-World Writers](#).

Every time I taught a *Class Writing Project* (which you can access for yourselves [here](#)), it was to give children another way in which to pursue the fundamental reasons we are all moved to write. Everything we did always came as a result of the children wanting to know more about how to *entertain, reflect, persuade and influence, teach others* and how to *paint with words*. These purposes still drive the resources and projects The Writing For Pleasure Centre creates with the children and teachers we work with today.

<p>Teach</p>  <p>Teach others by sharing their experience and knowledge, or to teach themselves by writing to learn.</p>	<p>Persuade Or Influence</p>  <p>Persuade or influence others by sharing their thoughts and opinions.</p>	<p>Entertain</p>  <p>Entertain themselves or others by sharing stories – both real and imagined.</p>
<p>Paint With Words</p>  <p>Paint with words to show their artistry and their ability to see things differently, or to simply play around and have fun.</p>	<p>Reflect</p>  <p>Reflect in order to better understand themselves, their place in the world or their response to a new subject.</p>	<p>Make A Record</p>  <p>Make a record of something to look back on that they don't want to forget.</p>

The reasons children are moved to write taken from Real-World Writers (2020 pp. 4–7).

The young writers I've worked with over the years have always known which genres will best serve their purposes, and how certain textual features and [grammatical devices](#) can work as a tool to enhance what it is they are so motivated to 'get off their chest' and share with others. I believe this can only come as a result of high-quality genre teaching.

What I realised at that time was how much I enjoyed introducing genres to my class. I don't think anything brings me greater professional satisfaction than introducing and teaching about a genre and then seeing how children will choose to use it for themselves. Unfortunately, this kind of genre teaching is a very far cry from what has occurred in the recent past. Genre teaching has suffered a lot - harmed by how it was badly interpreted in The National Literacy Strategy. Poor genre teaching has resulted (justifiably by the way) in some terrible names being associated with it. For example: the conformity approach, the recipe approach, painting by numbers, the standardised approach, the 'textual police' approach and even the 'strait-jacket' approach (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

Here are some things I've learnt about **bad** genre teaching:

- Teachers too often see their role as being a genre 'factory-foreman' and their children as factory workers who all have to produce the same looking piece of writing. These teachers don't invite children to use taught genres for their own purposes. Instead, they control the ideas for a writing project and children produce thirty largely identical pieces. In this way, the children learn little.
- Teachers who don't accept that genres change over time and according to circumstances, and that they are often manipulated and hybridised by young writers, don't do themselves any favours. The idea of 'genre play' through experimentation and exploration must be made available to children. Children should never be asked to simply and slavishly reproduce a genre.
- Teachers too often fail to see that non-fiction texts can be enhanced when children are allowed to merge them with other more expressive genres. See our non-fiction [Class Writing Projects](#) for more information.
- It is utterly possible that children know about and can already write successfully and creatively in the dominant genres of society. Lengthy and explicit teaching of linguistic 'rules' can sometimes contribute very little to children's writing development.
- Writing is too often judged as 'successful' just because of the inclusion of arbitrary 'genre features'. This is wrong. In my view, it's far more sensible to assess the piece in its own right and in terms of attention to purpose and audience - did the reader get out of it what the writer intended?
- Children are too often taught a very large number of genres in a scattergun approach and without any kind of consideration for progression and with no kind of purposeful rationale.
- There is often too little concern and attention given to children's personal growth as writers.

(Young & Ferguson [2021](#) p.7-8)

I wanted my approach to writing to be different. I knew very early on (thanks to the work of Donald Graves) that children naturally love to write and they want to write what they mean. My job was to create the conditions and teach them important lessons about writing that could help them craft texts that were meaningful to them, successful according to their readership, and met or exceeded curriculum objectives. Luckily, the first two points naturally go hand in hand in achieving academic excellence.

It's my conviction (and [the research backs me up on this](#)) that [Class Writing Projects](#) are most meaningful to children when they are given the opportunity to generate their own subject and purpose, write at their own pace, in their own way, with agency over how they want to use the genre, and with a clear sense of a real anticipated reader.

At the beginning of any new writing project, we would have 'genre-study' sessions. As a merry band of writers, we discussed genre conventions, we read a variety of good real-life examples of the genre in action (including pieces I had written). We considered what we might have to do to create a successful and meaningful text of our own, we all thought about who we wanted to write for, and importantly, *what* we were moved to write about most.

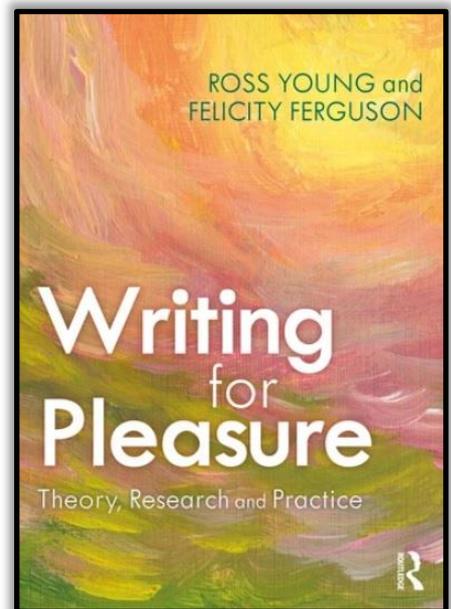
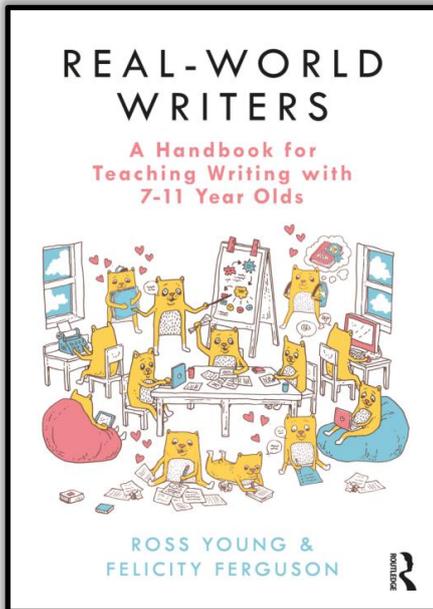
I encouraged my classes to manipulate and subvert any so-called genre conventions because - why not - and also because it's fun. My job wasn't to be the 'genre police' but rather to help them craft personally worthwhile and academically fruitful texts that their readers would appreciate and respond to. If this meant going against some arbitrary concept of a 'pure' genre - then so be it.

What was amazing (and what I'm so happy about when I visit schools who use our approach now), is how, once children have been invited to take their own germ of an idea and nurse it through to publication and performance, in a taught genre, the genre stays in their backpack of writing knowledge evermore. It becomes part of who they are and their writing repertoire. They can come back to it whenever they feel moved to use it. I saw this in my class' [Personal Writing Projects](#) all the time. Children were undertaking their own projects at home and bringing them into school too. I even had parents coming up to the classroom after school to ask for a copy of one of our now famous [Genre-Booklets](#) so that they could write something for themselves at home. For the children, the genres had become something they felt they owned rather than something they simply had to rent for a while from their teacher. The children began to dictate what genres they wanted to learn about. Our [Graphic Novel](#) and [Match Report](#) writing projects came directly from children asking me during writing time if I had any good tips on how to write them.

If I may, I want to share a final anecdote dear to my heart. I'll always remember Ben coming to see me during reading time to ask me if I knew how to write poetry for a funeral. He explained that he wanted to write something for his Grandpa who had just died. His parents suggested that he asked me - me being a *writer*. I told him how he could write a eulogy and that he could even use the things he already knew about poetry to help him. I'll never forget how, when he was finished, he asked whether he could read it to the community of writers that was our classroom to see what his fellow writers thought of it, and I'll never forget their kind and thoughtful responses he received from them.

And so I end this love letter (which isn't a letter at all), by simply repeating my opening line: *when we shape our writing curriculum around genres, we give children access to the world and the fundamental reasons we are all moved to write*. Surely, the goal for any world-class writing teacher.

Further Reading



And finally...

- If you're interested in developing your writing teaching further, we offer a wide-range of evidence-informed CPD including our popular school residency programme, teacher workshops and multi-day institutes. Find out more at www.writing4pleasure.com/training

CPD

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