

The DfE's Reading Framework: Our Review And Implications For Teaching Writing



The Writing For Pleasure Centre
- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

On the 10th of July 2021, the Department for Education published its non-statutory guidance document entitled '[The reading framework: Teaching the foundations of literacy](#)'. It purports to provide guidance for schools to meet existing expectations for teaching early reading and writing (p.78).

The mission of [The Writing For Pleasure Centre](#) is to help all young people become passionate and successful writers. As a think tank for exploring what world-class writing is and could be, a crucial part of our work is analysing emerging governmental policy. It is therefore important that we issue a response to what this document has to say.

Overall conclusion

If commercial scheme writers and schools pursue the recommendations made in this policy paper in any kind of serious way, we run the very real risk of developing the most reluctant, listless and unmotivated writers for a generation. While some of the recommendations within the policy paper are welcome, it remains grossly incomplete. We therefore urge anyone interested in developing world-class writing teaching to read the cited research within this review before making any changes to their writing teaching or commercial offerings.

The 'Writing Readiness' Ideology

This policy paper defies research recommendations. Not a single research paper relating to early writing development is cited. Therefore, we can only conclude that the DfE has decided to promote an ideological position of 'writing readiness' rather than pursue an evidence-based and research-informed position.

Writing readiness is also referred to in research and literature as: a presentational skills ideology (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)), a worksheet curriculum (Dahl & Freppon [1995](#)), the fragmented and discontinuous approach (Dunsmuir & Blatchford [2004](#)), mechanics-orientated teaching, didactic-only instruction, the bottom-up perspective, code-based teaching (Quinn & Bingham [2018](#)), drill-and-skill-to-kill-the-will, piecemeal, sequenced and scripted, recite for writing, writing as a cognitive only matter (Johnston [2019](#)), the transcribing speech orientation (Lancaster [2007](#)), the component skills perspective (Harmey & Wilkinson [2019](#)), formula writing (VanNess et al. [2013](#)), the write 'correctly' like an adult perspective (Daniels [2014](#)), the artificial approach (Thomas [2005](#)), the systematic procedures perspective (Bruyère & Pendergrass [2020](#)), the exercise approach (Håland et al. [2019](#)), the 'only conventional writing is real writing' perspective (Bradford & Wyse [2020](#)) or the 'additive-cumulative' view of writing (Tolchinsky [2017](#)).

We know that children who don't master the basic skills of writing early into their educational journey can go on to underperform and even experience school failure (Berninger et al. [2002](#); Abbott et al. [2010](#); Young & Ferguson [2021](#)). With this in mind, advocates of a 'writing readiness' ideology erroneously take the view that we must therefore focus on getting children to transcribe conventionally *first* before they are allowed to begin making and sharing meaning through writing. However, this is a serious instructional mistake (Snyders [2014](#); Rowe [2018](#)). This perspective is ineffective in achieving its own aims and is most often suggested by those who are unaware of current research and best practice (Hall et al. [2015](#)). The problem with such an approach is not so much what it includes but rather what it decides to leave out (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

Advocates for this approach typically hold the view that for children to learn how to write, they must first be told that they can't (Roser et al. [2014](#)). They fail to see that children want to write from the very first day they attend school (Graves [1983](#)), that ninety percent of children come to school on the first day believing they can write (Calkins [1994](#)), and that actually children are 'already ready' to write (Ray & Glover [2008](#); Ackerman [2016](#); Bradford & Wyse [2020](#)). Despite this, a 'writing-readiness' ideology asks teachers to position their pupils as 'transcribers and dictators' who must practise specific transcriptional skills until near mastery, before earning their right to write.

Limitations:

- Firstly, the withholding of meaningful writing opportunities until basic skills have been mastered defies research recommendations (Gerde et al. [2012](#); Graham et al. [2012](#)).
- Policymakers shouldn't confuse spelling and handwriting development with writing development. Spelling represents only a fraction of what we must develop in the youngest of writers (Tolchinsky [2017](#)). Through a 'writing-readiness' orientation, children learn only about *transcribing*. They can only learn about *writing* and *authoring* from instruction about writing and being a writer and through repeated daily meaningful practice. Slavishly copying out isolated letters and sentences is not writing (Ferreiro [1982](#)).
- According to both Johnston ([2019](#)) and Young & Ferguson ([2021](#)), policymakers are right to give their attention and focus to the cognitive dimensions of learning to write, but their limitations lie in their failure to see or care that this cognitive development is also emotionally and affectively loaded and therefore needs to be embedded in motivating, social and meaningful practice.
- Expertise in composition and transcription influence each other and support each other's acquisition. Therefore, to somehow ban meaning making until full transcription is achieved is tremendously harmful and counter-productive.
- This policy document is essentially asking children to prepare for an apprenticeship that never feels like it is going to come. For example, Håland et al. ([2019](#) p.70) notes that 'it is unclear whether students understand for what purpose they are exercising'. As a result, children quickly become uninterested in writing.
- According to Mackenzie & Veresov ([2013](#)), a 'writing readiness' perspective can disrupt children's natural text construction process by underestimating or denying the significance of drawing as part of children's writing process. Indeed, this policy paper holds no value in children's drawings contributing to their writing development.
- If children are allowed the opportunity to share meaning, it's suggested that teachers step in and write the message on that child's behalf by getting the child to dictate what it was they wanted to say. As a result, children don't learn how they could write without a teacher present. Indeed, under this conception, teachers are being asked to assume all cognitive responsibility for the writing activities that take place in the classroom, leaving children passive and actually learning very little.
- This policy paper supports linear planning and a one-size fits all teaching practice. However, according to Boyle & Charles ([2010](#)), good early writing teaching involves responsive teaching and a great deal of individualised instruction.
- The recommendations in this policy document will train a generation of children to be dependent rather than independent writers. For example, according to Jacobson ([2010](#) p.2), 'story starters or writing prompts, fill-in-the-blank sentences or waiting until January to begin writing ("when the

students know their letters”) are just a few of the ways we communicate to students that they are not capable of writing and thinking on their own”.

The importance of talk and play

We are pleased that the policy paper acknowledges the importance of high expectations, rigorous routines, and clear organisation. For example, teachers with the most engaged and best performing pupils are also superb classroom managers (Wharton-McDonald et al. [1998](#)). There are few disciplinary encounters because the students are so engaged with their writing. Children know what to do and how to do it. They also know what to do when they don't know what to do (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

However, the document wrongly suggests that a ‘noisy’ classroom is an unproductive one. Talk and play are essential to developing children as writers if they regularly occur in calm, rigorous and well organised learning environments. The document fails to see that writing develops in an active, dynamic and highly social way. Children only understand what writing is, what it is for, and what it means to be a writer, if they write in a social and cultural context that matches what writers actually do (Lamme et al. [2002](#); Kissel [2009](#); Kissel et al. [2011](#); Tolentino [2013](#)). For example, empirical evidence shows that talking and playing while writing can initiate ideas, promote revising and encourage more cohesive, logical and structured texts; elaborate plots; action; dialogue and descriptive settings (McQuitty [2014](#)). In addition, when children write together, they engage in more sophisticated writerly behaviours, write longer pieces and write in a wider variety of genres (McQuitty [2014](#)).

Where are the writing centres?

It's such a shame that there is nothing mentioned about writing across the day or the use of writing centres despite the fact that they are both essential to children's writing development (Mayer [2007](#); Rowe [2008](#); Tolentino [2013](#); Quinn et al. [2016](#); Bingham et al. [2017](#), [2018](#); Bollinger & Myers [2020](#)).

Letter formation and handwriting

Learning to form letters and spell words requires considerable effort and attention. Schools, therefore, should consider the advantages to children of delaying the teaching of joined handwriting. Nearly all the headteachers in the schools Ofsted visited for its ‘Bold beginnings’ survey did not teach a cursive or pre-cursive script in Reception. They told inspectors that they believed:

... it slowed down children's writing, at a point when they already found manual dexterity tricky and the muscles in their shoulders, arms and hands were still developing.

(The Reading Framework [p.49](#))

It's well known that early writers should focus their efforts on ‘automaticity’ and fluency of handwriting rather than on the adherence to any particular style (Graham et al. [2012](#); Santangelo & Graham [2016](#)). The main aim at this age is for children to write quickly, accurately and effortlessly. The fact is children who write with automaticity go on to perform very well in their later years and produce higher-quality pieces (Puranik & AlOtaiba [2012](#); Malpique et al. [2017](#), [2020](#)). We are therefore pleased to see the policy paper support this position.

We are also pleased that the policy paper highlights the importance of letter formation and handwriting instruction as being absolutely essential, that it needs to occur daily, and that it is best practised in connection with daily phonics instruction (Rowe [2018](#); Graham et al. [2018](#)). However, what the document ignores is how important it is that teachers invite children to use all that they've learnt about letter formation during a daily ‘writing workshop time’ and/or through their daily play in the writing centre.

The document also fails to mention how children’s letter formation develops through a recursive process of: drawings and scribbles; linear scribbles and mock handwriting and letter-like symbols. This then progresses to: random but real letter strings; letters that represent key sounds learnt; spaces that indicate separation between words; ‘sound spellings’ using phonics knowledge before finally spelling words conventionally.

Stages of Emergent Writing		
Stage	Description	Example
Drawing	Drawings that represent writing	
Scribbling	Marks or scribbles the child intends to be writing	
Wavy scribbles or mock handwriting	Wavy scribbles that imitate cursive writing and have a left-to-right progression; child pretends to write words	
Letter-like forms or mock letters	Letters and marks that resemble letter-like shapes	
Letter strings	Strings of letters that do not create words, written left to right, including uppercase and lowercase letters	
Transitional writing	Letters with spaces in between to resemble words; letters/words copied from environmental print; letters often reversed	
Invented or phonetic spelling	Different ways to represent the sounds in words; the first letter of the word or beginning and ending sounds represent the entire word	
Beginning word and phrase writing	Words with beginning, middle, and ending letter sounds; short phrases	
Conventional spelling and sentence writing	Correct spelling of words, generally the child’s name and words such as <i>mom</i> and <i>dad</i> ; sentences with punctuation and correct use of uppercase and lowercase letters	

(Byington & Kim 2017)

Confusion around spelling

Again, we praise the document for highlighting the importance of teaching children to encode during daily phonics instruction. We want children to learn how others can begin to understand the texts they make when they are not around to tell or explain them to their readers.

'Teachers should encourage correct spelling' ([p.50](#)). A strange and developmentally inappropriate suggestion especially when you consider the report's own recommendation that teachers should praise children's attempts at spelling in 'phonetically-plausible ways' (also known as using their 'sound-spellings' or 'invented spellings'). Indeed, children who receive phonics instruction orientated towards producing 'sound spellings' outperform children who don't on a whole variety of writing and reading measures (Gerade et al. [2012](#); Rowe [2018](#)). However, rather confusingly, the paper then suggests that teachers shouldn't model 'sound spellings' despite the fact that children are being asked to adopt the strategy for themselves when writing independently. In summary, teachers aren't to model a strategy that the policy document wants children to use.

The importance of drawing

Alongside talking and oral rehearsal, drawing is young children's most appropriate planning technique. It's important to give time to drawing because, that when children are encouraged to draw as part of their writing process, they create more meaningful texts and with deeper complexity than they would without drawing (Horn & Giacobbe [2007](#); Christianakis [2011](#); Hui [2011](#); Mackenzie [2011](#); Mackenzie & Veresov [2013](#); Olshansky [2014](#)).

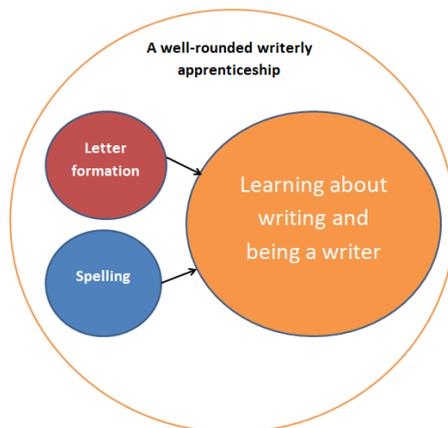
The document doesn't appreciate the early signs, marks, symbols and drawings children put down on screen or paper as being writing (a way of making and sharing meaning). People did not create a transcriptional system first and then decide to share meaning with it afterwards (Lancaster [2007](#); Wyse [2017](#)). Under this guidance, children will unfortunately learn that if you are to write you must essentially write conventionally and like an adult or not at all.

What's it all for?

'Let us be clear. If children do not learn and internalise the essential transcriptional skills involved in crafting writing - spelling, handwriting, and punctuation - then their attempts to share meaning with others may be compromised or even fruitless...Therefore, [any] call to teach fundamental writing skills is always welcome. However, it is not intended that transcriptional skills be taught in isolation, away from the craft of meaning making and sharing (Young & Ferguson [2021](#) p.177).

We support the paper's focus on teaching encoding (spelling) and letter formation/handwriting through the context of high-quality and dedicated phonics instruction. However, the suggestion that 'extra time to write is unnecessary' and that being given time to write only results in cognitive overload and damage to motivation goes against everything we know about developing young writers. For example, the document neglects to see how instruction in letter formation, handwriting and encoding (spelling) should, as far as children are concerned, serve their daily sustained and meaningful opportunity for writing. It's only from this meaning-sharing orientation that children *want* to learn more about how to form letters and encode words so they can better share their meanings (Louden et al. [2005](#); Wohlwend [2008](#); Hui [2011](#); Herste [2012](#); Graham et al. [2012](#); Dennis & Votteler [2013](#); Ouellette & Sénéchal [2017](#)).

The document essentially provides no guidance on how to develop the orange circle in the figure below:



Instruction in letter formation (handwriting) and spelling during phonics sessions should be there to serve children's daily opportunities to make and share meaning through writing.

It's critical that teachers promote and give instruction in all three of the above components. These three dimensions need to develop alongside one another in order for children to understand the world of being a writer. Despite the fact that the report acknowledges the importance of composition (p.50), the paper focuses exclusively on letter formation and children's ability to spell and spends no time discussing how to teach children to be writers and how to teach compositional techniques, procedures and strategies. According to research and the case studies of the best performing teachers, this is a grave error (Poulson et al. [2001](#); Pressley et al. [2001](#); Block et al. [2002](#); Louden et al. [2005](#); Jones et al. [2010](#); Graham et al. [2012](#); Dombey [2013](#); Kent et al. [2014](#); Puranik & Lonigan [2014](#); Hall et al. [2015](#)).

When children are invited to compose meaningful texts every day, their opportunities to practise letter formation and spelling are naturally supported within an authentic context. Teachers who teach writing through a contemporary and rigorous 'writing workshop approach' have children who perform just as well in the 'basic skills' of letter formation and spelling as those teachers who make these components their sole instructional priority (Dahl & Freppon [1995](#); Hall [2019](#); Roitsch et al. [2021](#)). This is because children are encouraged to use what they learn about letters, words and sentences, to create and share meaning. They acquire meaningful knowledge about transcription (spelling, letter formation, handwriting), when they are invited to use it meaningfully rather than through exercises, skills and worksheets. When children enact the processes that real writers do (but in a developmentally appropriate way), they produce writing products which can meet the needs of the curriculum (Wiseman [2003](#); Harmeý & Wilkinson [2019](#); Managhan [2020](#); Barratt-Pugh et al. [2021](#)).

It is this balance between explicit and direct instruction and meaningful practice which makes for world-class writing teaching.

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