

A whole generation of children have been put on ‘writers’ welfare’



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

The Standards & Testing Agency, rightly, wants schools to develop independent writers (STA [2018a](#), [2018b](#)). However, it's clear that many writing pedagogies aren't fit for this purpose. They aren't orientated towards teaching children to be motivated and independent writers (Young & Ferguson [2021a](#), [2022](#)). In these pedagogies, children have become dependent on their teachers - what Donald Graves called being on 'writers' welfare'.



Please sir, can I have another writing prompt?

Graves warned us that this would happen over forty years ago (Graves [1976](#), [1983](#)). He told us that children will be content to sit patiently and wait until they are told what they must write. Children will learn that to write is to write for an audience of one - their teacher. They will be dependent and controlled within an inch of their writing lives. They won't be required to make any kind of writerly decisions. It will all be planned and done on their behalf. They will also learn that to write well is to write about the things your teacher likes (Young et al. [2022](#)). We now have a generation of children who have received a writing apprenticeship which has left them listless and indifferent. They are consumers rather than producers, reciters not writers, responders not composers (Young & Ferguson [2020](#)). They believe writing is an artificial act which they are disconnected from.

I often visualise a child sitting outside their primary school on the last day of Year Six. They have in their hand a suitcase labelled 'writing and being a writer'. The suitcase should be full of everything they will need to go on and write successfully and happily (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)). At the moment, I wonder what it is we put in their suitcase that is helpful to them. I wonder whether children will be able to write well when there is no teacher to do it for them.

A question worth asking is this: what would happen if you gave the children in your class a series of open-ended writing sessions every day across a few weeks? What do you predict your class would do? A school which teaches their children how to be independent writers would be pretty confident (Young & Ferguson [2021b](#)). Others, I suspect, would be terrified. Their students would be like fish out of water. They've never been asked to write anything independently. They've not been taught the metacognitive or self-regulation strategies they would need to be successful and productive (Young et al. [2021](#)).

'We need to break the teaching cycle that places young people on writer's welfare. Children won't learn if we think for them... We want independent learners and thinkers. We want independent writers.' - Donald Graves

Graves' messages have often been misunderstood - that somehow he was telling us that teachers shouldn't teach. Yet he called for:

- Explicit instruction to be coupled with self-regulation.
- Children to have a daily, sustained and meaningful opportunity to practise writing.
- Children to receive verbal feedback and additional individualised instruction while they are writing.

These all remain bedrocks of what we know about world-class writing teaching today (Graves [1983](#), [1994](#); Wyse [2019](#); Young & Ferguson [2022b](#)).

'Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school... The child's marks say, "I am". "No you aren't," say most school approaches to the teaching of writing... We take the control away from children and place unnecessary road blocks in the way... Then we say, "They don't want to write. How can we motivate them?"' - Donald Graves

It's important to point out that Graves predicted that teachers too would lose their sense of ownership and professionalism in the writing classroom. They too will be put on 'writers' welfare'. He talks of how there will be an increasing mistrust of accountability measures and that these measures will spread paranoia and suspicion around the profession. This has certainly come to pass. As we have said, the Standards & Testing Agency wants schools to develop independent writers. However, because of the high-stakes nature of the DfE's use of schools' results, some feel that they must put their children on writers' welfare to get the results they need. However, this 'writers' welfare' pedagogy has not led to a rise in standards.

- In [2021](#), around one in three children left primary school without meeting the basic 'met' standard for writing.
- In [2020](#), children's writing enjoyment was at its lowest since records began.
- In [2019](#), a quarter of children failed to achieve the early learning goal for writing at the end of the early years foundation stage (EYFS).
- In [2019](#), around 30% of children failed to achieve the 'met' standard at KS1. Only 16% of children at KS1 were able to demonstrate that they could write above the basic 'met' standard.
- In [2019](#), prior to the pandemic, only one in five KS2 children in England were able to write above the 'met' standard. Approximately, one in four children left primary school without meeting the standard for writing.

This was predicted by academic George Hillocks when he concluded that a 'writers' welfare' model for teaching writing is the least effective of all the orientations a school could adopt (Hillocks [1986](#); Young & Ferguson [2021a](#), [2022](#)). But it doesn't have to be this way. There are

schools who are doing fantastic work and teaching their children how to live the writer's life ([LINK](#)).

I'll finish with Graves and his gentle reminder to us all: the only way we can get children off writers' welfare is to put writing back where it belongs - in the hands of the child.

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