Supporting children with SEND to be great writers
A guide for teachers and SENCOS

Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson
The Writing For Pleasure Centre

The Writing For Pleasure Centre functions both as a think tank and as an action research community. The result is that we are continually engaged in sharing effective practices, case studies and research findings. The mission of The Writing For Pleasure Centre is to help all young people become passionate and successful writers. We look to accomplish this goal by investigating what world-class writing teaching might be. We do this through:

- Our school residencies and teacher training workshops.
- Curriculum development and creating resources.
- Conducting, disseminating and publishing research.
- Working with children, teachers, school leaders, teacher-educators and charities.

It’s our hope that teachers regard The Writing For Pleasure Centre as a place where they can access a specialist network and continued professional development that is free.

If you’re new to the idea of a Writing For Pleasure pedagogy, you can read all about it at: writing4pleasure.com

Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson are the founders of The Writing For Pleasure Centre and authors of Writing For Pleasure: Theory, Research & Practice, The Science Of Teaching Primary Writing and Real-World Writers: A Handbook For Teaching Writing With 7-11 Year Olds and Writing. They both hold MAs in applied linguistics in education. As passionate writer-teachers, they now work around the UK and abroad helping teachers and schools develop extraordinary young writers. They convene The United Kingdom Literacy Association's international Teaching Writing Special Interest Group and also help run their Teachers' Writing Group. Ross was the lead researcher on ‘What is it Writing For Pleasure teachers do that makes the difference?’ Their work continues to focus on the learning and teaching of young writers and is informed by their ongoing work with classroom teachers and early years educators.
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Some years ago, we were teaching at our local primary school and we came to the conclusion that we were probably the worst teachers of writing in the whole entire world. We hated doing it, we hated teaching it, and our students got terrible results. Our students also hated writing and they hated us teaching it too!

Research has since confirmed why this was, and it appears that we were far from alone. Some of you might feel like this too. The fact is that many of us didn’t receive the writerly education we should have had while we were at school. We know this because research shows that a great number of teachers feel deep shame about their own writing abilities, and consequently have grown up disliking writing. A friend of ours, Paul Gardner, carried out some investigations, and found that less than 2% of teachers wrote with or for pleasure, with half reporting that they had never felt any pleasure from writing in their lives (Gardner 2014). To make matters worse, the research surrounding ITE reveals that the majority of teachers around the world leave their teacher training feeling ill-prepared to teach writing (Young & Ferguson 2023a).

This is a serious problem, because how we were taught writing at school has a strong influence on how we feel about the subject, how we think it should be taught and what we know about it - our writerly knowledge. Unfortunately, it appears from the research that, as teachers, we regularly copy the same failed writing teaching that we once received (Young & Ferguson 2021a, 2023a). We should point out that there is of course a significant minority of teachers to whom this doesn’t apply - but it certainly applied to us.

We tried all the popular approaches in the UK at the time and none of them worked. We were frustrated. We wanted to do something about it. We decided that we would build a writing pedagogy from scratch and base it on what the science and research evidence said was the most effective and affecting practice (Young & Ferguson 2021a, 2022a, 2023a). We were no longer going to leave things to chance.

We conducted a total of twenty-three literature reviews spanning more than fifty years of scientific research. First, we started with the meta-analyses. For those who might not be familiar with the term, a meta-analysis is where a researcher will group many scientific studies on a particular subject in order to identify recurring patterns of effectiveness. We then read what case studies tell us about what the best performing writing teachers do in their classrooms which makes the difference. We discovered that there are 14 enduring principles which represent the most effective teaching practice. These principles all have a track record of raising standards and accelerating progress in writing. The principles are:

1. Build a community of writers
2. Treat every child as a writer
3. Read, share, think and talk about writing
4. Pursue purposeful and authentic class writing projects
5. Teach the writing processes
6. Set writing goals
7. Be reassuringly consistent
8. Pursue personal writing projects
9. Balance composition & transcription
10. Teach daily mini-lessons
11. Be a writer-teacher
12. Pupil-conference: meet children where they are
13. Connect reading & writing
14. Interconnect the principles

Interestingly, we noted that there were also six affective needs (relating to the emotions) that teachers should attend to in order to help children write happily and successfully. These needs are:
Once these principles and affective needs were identified, we reviewed the research on each one to help us better understand what we could be doing in our classroom to make the difference. In the end, we decided to call our approach the Writing For Pleasure approach. And now, for us, Writing For Pleasure has become simply a synonym for world-class writing teaching.

We began using this new approach, and it was having a transformative impact on our students. We moved to another school to see if it would work in another context, and it did. We then started to write about the pedagogy online, and other teachers started reporting that they were getting the same great results that we were.

Fast forward to 2019, and we were lucky enough to be given a research grant in conjunction with the Goldsmiths’ Company and University Of Sussex. We travelled around to see what it was these other ‘Writing For Pleasure’ teachers were doing. What was special about this study was that, to participate, the teachers had to show that they had a track record for accelerating children's progress, and that their children reported that they loved to write and felt their affective writerly needs were being met.

What we found out from all this work has since been published as a book called Writing For Pleasure: Theory, Research & Practice (Young & Ferguson 2021a) and the establishment of The Writing For Pleasure Centre.

The Writing For Pleasure Centre is now informed by over 600 pieces of literature, case study work, action research by teachers in our affiliate schools, and empirical research on the subject of teaching writing (Young & Ferguson 2023a).

The Writing For Pleasure approach involves children and teachers writing together every single day. They write for many different purposes, and for a variety of audiences. They are moved to write about what they are most knowledgeable and passionate about. They also write to deepen their responses and understandings of what they read. They write to transform their own (and others’) thinking about what they learn in the wider curriculum subjects. They write to entertain, to paint with words, to persuade and share their opinions, to teach others, to make a record of things they don’t want to forget, and to reflect on their own thoughts and personal experiences. They write about themselves and their cultures. They also write to reflect and sustain the cultures of people they might not have met. They share their writing and talk about themselves as writers with their peers, teachers and caregivers. They learn how to live the writer’s life.

Pupils explore new genres of writing through whole class writing projects. Together, they discuss the purpose of the writing project, explore its basic features, and study mentor texts together. They consider who they would like to write their pieces for and what they would like to write about most. Students are taught how to use the same features and expert techniques they identified from the mentor texts in their own compositions. They learn how to attend to their spellings, handwriting, grammar, and sentence construction. This helps them write happily and fluently. Pupils acquire a great deal of craft knowledge – what we call craft moves. This includes writerly strategies and techniques for negotiating the writing processes. We want children to know how they can take a germ of an idea and see it through to publication independently and successfully. Students are supported by being provided with clear processes and ambitious writing goals. They are given ample time and instruction in how to plan and how to improve on what they have already written through specific revision and proof-reading sessions.

Pupils receive daily in-the-moment verbal feedback and responsive assessment-based individualised instruction through teacher-pupil conferencing. These conversations are designed to push the writer and move their writing forward. Pupils are given many opportunities to discuss their compositions with their teachers and peers. At least one hour a day is devoted to the explicit teaching of writing and, within this time, children are engaged in writing meaningfully for a sustained period. We believe this is the only way they can learn about the discipline of writing.
and of being a writer. Across a school day, children also have opportunities to write about their reading and in response to their learning in other subjects. Importantly, pupils have access to personal writing journals which travel freely between home and school. We want children to live the writer’s life and to be in a constant state of composition.

Genuine writing communities are created in classrooms. Children write in positive and enthusiastic writing environments which are headed up by passionate writer-teachers. Classrooms feel like a mixture of creative writing workshops and professional publishing houses. The approach is rigorous, highly-organised and reassuringly consistent. Pupils are encouraged to take risks and to be innovative, but also to write with focus and serious intent. Teaching is responsive - depending on what individual children need instruction in most. Whether they are in Nursery or Year Six and regardless of where they are in their language development or writerly experience, all children are treated as writers and are helped not only to write pieces which are successful in terms of the objectives of the curriculum but also meaningful to them as young authors.

Felicity Ferguson & Ross Young
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Introduction

The reason writing helps students with learning disabilities is that they do far more than learn to write: They learn to come to terms with a new image of themselves as thinkers - thinkers with a message to convey to the world

- Donald Graves

Writing is language on paper. More than 85% of people in the world write, and writing is intimately connected to every aspect of our lives (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina 2016). For example:

- **Academic success.** Rightly or wrongly, writing is by far the most popular way of assessing students’ knowledge. Therefore, students’ access to qualifications rests heavily on their ability to write well.
- **Economic success.** Most employees need to be able to write to perform their jobs, and people’s writing skills are routinely assessed by employers when making decisions about hiring new staff (Light 2001).
- **Economic success.** Writing is great currency. For the 15% of self-employed people in the UK, an ability to produce writing is essential to the success of their businesses.
- **Social inclusion.** Writing allows us to stay connected with loved ones and to participate in online discourse (including social media) with confidence.
- **Civic and political participation.** Writing allows us to persuade others, share theories, give our opinion, and bring about change.
- **As an art form.** Writing allows people to create imaginary worlds, entertain others and to paint with words.
- **Personal well-being.** Writing allows us to record the things we don't want to forget, express our feelings, share who we are, share what we know, better understand ourselves, and potentially heal emotional wounds.

Children who fail to master writing miss out on many aspects of being a fully-fledged member of our society and find themselves at a severe disadvantage. Poor writing skills limit children's academic, occupational, cultural, civic and personal ambitions. For these reasons, we refuse to allow writing and being a writer to remain a mystery for children with special educational needs or disabilities.

However, at present, too many children with SEND (also identified as having intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), learning disabilities (LD), or as being struggling writers (SW)) are leaving school feeling the effects of poor writing skills. According to the Department For Education in England (DfE 2022a), nearly 90% of children with a SEND didn't reach the expected standard for reading, writing and maths at KS2. This is particularly concerning when you consider the DfE's ambition for 90% of all pupils to meet the expected standard in reading, writing and maths by 2030 (DfE 2022c).

In 2021, over 80% of pupils with a SEND left secondary school without a ‘pass' grade in English and mathematics. Only 8% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care plan progressed to higher education, compared to nearly 50% of pupils with no identified SEND. Finally, only 5% of adults with learning disabilities aged 18-64 and who are receiving support from social services are in paid employment. Currently, around 1.5 million pupils in England have a special educational need or disability (DfE 2022b).

This book is designed to help teachers and SENCOs support writers who have special educational needs or disabilities, which can include dyslexia (Al Otaiba et al. 2018; Hebert 2018), dysgraphia (Berninger & May 2011), specific language impairments (Myhill & Jones 2018), attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (Lienemann & Reid 2008), neurodevelopmental disorders (Filipe 2021) and autism spectrum disorder (Dockrell et al. 2014). We also provide guidance on how to support young writers with behavioural or emotional disorders (Lane et al. 2006; Graham & Harris 2002).

For all students, writing is the most cognitively challenging thing they do while at school. Writing requires children to coordinate at least thirteen different cognitive resources simultaneously (Young & Ferguson 2022a). In addition, there are many social, emotional, metacognitive and self-regulatory skills that they have to use and apply to produce a great piece of writing, and to develop themselves as confident and successful writers (Young & Ferguson 2021a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children with learning disabilities can find it difficult to:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Conceptualise what their writing is meant to do for their reader and what it is meant to look like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Write imaginatively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Organise their ideas and write with a strong authorial voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Generate ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Translate their ideas into sentences fluently.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
● Find the words they want to use.
● Craft sentences which are transcriptionally accurate.
● Use conventional spelling.
● Handwrite quickly, happily and fluently.
● Rework their compositions and make revisions.
● Manage themselves during writing time.

Children with learning disabilities typically have:

● Less writerly knowledge than their peers.
● Less process knowledge than their peers.
● Less genre knowledge than their peers.
● Negative feelings about writing and being a writer.

Children with learning disabilities typically believe that:

● Writing is about mechanics, spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and penmanship.
● They can't write without someone else being there to help them.

Children with learning disabilities typically produce writing that is:

● Low in quality, disorganised and lacking cohesion.

(Asaro-Saddler & Saddler 2010; Hayes & Berninger 2014; Connelly & Dockrell 2016; Graham et al. 2017; Ray & Graham 2019; Graham & Harris 2020; Filipe 2021; Young & Ferguson 2021a; Filipe 2021; Dunn 2022; Gallego-Ortega et al. 2022)

We acknowledge that this list probably doesn't come as a surprise and we suspect you are already very good at diagnosing children's writerly needs. However, we are also aware that teachers have been routinely let down by their initial teacher education. Many teachers report that they are unsure how to actually support their struggling writers and are unaware of the evidence-based writing practices which are particularly effective for children with SEND (Graham & Harris 2020; Young & Ferguson 2021a, 2022a, 2023a). Schools can also find it difficult to put together a cohesive plan, including interventions, for children with SEND. This is especially the case with schools struggling to reform writing pedagogy against a backdrop of teacher and leadership turnover and limited time and resources.

It's important to say that by no means is every student with a SEND a poor writer. Indeed, we've met many pupils with a SEND who are exceptionally talented writers. It's also important to say that we have an absolute belief and faith in children with SEND. We think they are really funny, original, interesting, knowledgeable, thoughtful, and super smart. Students with SEND bring many writerly strengths to our classrooms.

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Evidence-based writing instruction for children with SEND

As we established in our introduction, children with SEND are regularly finding themselves behind their peers. The fact is that these children are developing at a slower pace than their classmates. Therefore, we must provide writing teaching and interventions which are as effective and as efficient as possible (Graham & Harris 2020). This is the only way of ensuring that they catch up and do not fall further behind. All of us came into teaching with the goal of making a difference in the lives of children who find school challenging, and there is nothing more challenging (and rewarding) as writing.

With this in mind, we recommend that teachers employ the practices of world-class writing teaching. These practices have a track record of accelerating children’s academic progress (Young & Ferguson 2021a, 2023a). And this is the point. Everything that is shared within these pages is good for all young writers. What is good instruction for all students is also good instruction for children with SEND. This makes sense because world-class writing teaching is essentially responsive teaching.

The world-class writing practices shared below were identified by investigating:

- The science of teaching writing.
- What for the past five decades educational researchers have repeatedly identified as effective practices in improving children’s writing performance.
- What a number of high-profile case studies tell us about how the most effective teachers of writing improve children’s academic progress.

What this research can’t do is take into account what you know to be good writing teaching based on your own unique experiences and expertise. This needs to be taken into account too.

The figure below lists the evidence-based instructional practices and their ‘effect size’. This tells us how powerful the type of instruction is found to be across the multiple studies analysed. Hattie (2009) suggests that anything at or above 0.4 can be considered to make a significant positive contribution towards children’s learning, while anything at −0.32 or below should be considered to have a significant negative impact (Hillocks 1986; Graham and Perin 2007). Effect sizes can often be different across different papers. For example, setting writing goals was given an effect size of 0.80 by Graham, Harris, and Chambers (2016) but 2.03 by Koster et al. (2015). Readers should therefore treat such findings only as a broad indicator of what can work when the conditions are right (Cheung & Slavin 2016; Van Weijen & Janssen 2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence-based writing practices (From Young &amp; Ferguson 2021a)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of instruction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mini-lessons (SRSD instruction)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching the writing processes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purposeful and authentic class writing projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working as a community of writers and reading, sharing, thinking, and talking about writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil-conferencing by the teacher and feedback from peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genre study</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time spent revising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating ideas, drawing, talking and making plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children writing in response to their reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functional grammar teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Formal grammar teaching</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This table shows the highest effect size recorded for each type of instruction using the following meta-analyses: Hillocks (1986), Graham (2006), Graham and Perin (2007), Graham and Sandmel (2011), Graham et al. (2012), Koster et al. (2015), Graham, Harris & Chambers (2016); Wyse & Torgerson (2017).
Below, we share the same kind of table, but this time we have systematically reviewed the studies specific to working with children with SEND. We hope that what you will notice immediately is just how similar the tables are.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of instruction</th>
<th>Effective size</th>
<th>Links to book sections</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal setting</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>Page 15 and 84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genre study</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>Page 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching the writing processes</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>Page 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating ideas, drawing, talking and making plans</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>Page 38 and 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini-lessons (SRSD instruction)</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>Page 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcriptional instruction (encoding, letter formation, handwriting and spelling)</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>Page 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a writer-teacher (modelling and writing alongside)</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>Page 16 and 95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil-conferencing by the teacher and feedback from peers</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>Page 15 and 95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows the highest effect size recorded for each type of instruction using the following sources and meta-analyses: Gersten & Baker (2001); Joseph & Konrad (2007); Santangelo & Olinghouse (2009); Graham et al. (2012); Datchuk & Kubina (2012); Gillespie & Graham (2014); Rouse & Graham (2016); Kaldenberg et al. (2016); McMaster et al. (2017); Al Otaiba et al. (2018); Rouse (2018); Dockrell & Arfé (2019); Datchuk et al. (2020); Graham & Harris (2020); Roitsch et al. (2021); Rodgers & Loveall (2022).

These tables confirm that teachers and schools who use the *Writing For Pleasure* approach and its associated materials are already doing an excellent job in supporting their children with SEND to become great writers. For example, the *Writing For Pleasure* approach ensures:

- Children are writing for a sustained period every single day (The Writing For Pleasure Centre 2023).
- Children are regularly invited to write about things they know a lot about and are motivated to write about. This means they are naturally writing from a position of confidence and strength (Young & Ferguson 2022b).
- Children are taught daily mini-lessons which are short, elegant, explicit and follow the principles of self-regulation strategy development instruction. This includes lessons on grammar, sentence construction and other literary craft moves (Young et al. 2021; Young & Ferguson 2022c, 2022d).
- Children are always set a precise and easily achievable ‘process goal’ for each lesson (see page 15).
- Writing instruction is regularly accompanied by a poster, chart, checklist or other resource to visualise and reiterate taught content (Young et al. 2021; Young & Ferguson 2022c, 2022d, 2022e; Young & Hayden 2022).
- Children get to write in environments which are calm, well-organised and reassuringly consistent (see page 28).
- Children with SEND are invited to write alongside their friends who may be more experienced writers.
- Children receive live verbal feedback and responsive individualised writing instruction every day from their writer-teacher (Ferguson & Young 2021).
- Children see writing modelled (either live or pre-made) every day as part of a good mini-lesson and they have opportunities to watch and write alongside their writer-teacher during writing time (Young et al. 2021; Young & Ferguson 2022c, 2022d, 2022e).
- Children are encouraged to use a writer’s process which suits where they are developmentally (see page 49).
• Expectations are clear as children are shown what they are expected to produce for themselves via the use of mentor texts and genre study (Young & Hayden 2022).

• Children receive a solid apprenticeship in writing in the EYFS and KS1. This means they master encoding, letter formation, handwriting fluency and basic sentence construction early into their writerly apprenticeship (The Writing For Pleasure Centre 2023; Young & Ferguson 2022f).

• Writing classrooms are set up to ensure that children are always expected (and importantly, are utterly able) to write well independently. This means they don't acquire bad habits like 'learned helplessness' (Young et al. 2021; Young & Ferguson 2022f).
Teachers (rightly) ask “And what about children with SEND?”

There have been few satisfactory answers to this question. So here, for the first time, is a book which explains with amazing clarity and simplicity how children with special educational needs and disabilities, and all who find writing difficult, can improve and achieve.

All children deserve the highest-quality writing teaching based on what research has long been telling us. In this eBook, we demonstrate:

- How the *Writing For Pleasure* approach *naturally* supports children who, for various reasons, find writing difficult.
- How to pinpoint a child’s writerly needs and quickly find the appropriate advice and practical real-world strategies that will help.
- How you can set up interventions for children which are closely connected to what they are expected to do in the writing classroom. This means you can be confident that the extra support you’re providing is responsive, relevant and effective.

The best solutions are often the most simple and elegant ones. This publication shows you exactly how to put them into practice, and see your struggling writers and children with SEND begin to flourish.