

Children's reflections on 'business as usual' writing units and *Writing For Pleasure* class writing projects.



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Over the past two years, we've been introducing *Writing For Pleasure* class writing projects (The Writing For Pleasure Centre [2022](#)) into our school's programme of study (business as usual). I asked children to reflect on writing and being a writer before and after their introduction. These reflections were gathered by asking children to complete the [Children As Writers](#) survey at the beginning and towards the end of the academic year.

What struck me were the distinctions made by many children between 'business as usual' writing units and *Writing For Pleasure* projects. Many children explicitly mentioned enjoying *Writing For Pleasure* projects and not enjoying lessons where they felt they were being 'told what to do'.

In the article below, I go into more detail about what those distinctions were and what impact they've had on my teaching going forward.

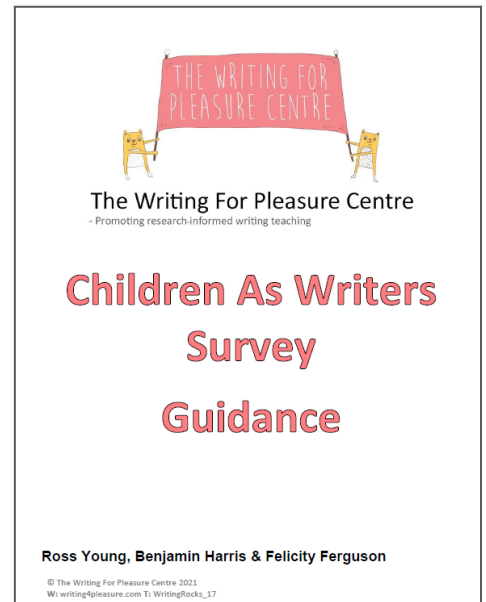
Results from surveys before the introduction of *Writing For Pleasure*

The first theme that I identified was the idea that writing was boring and not enjoyable. When asked 'What goes through your head when the teacher says: we are going to do some writing?', responses included: 'I do not want to do this', 'This will be long and hard', and 'boring'.

For example, one child said 'I like some writing but not all. I don't like being told what to write; I only like things I can decide.' Similarly, another child said 'Sometimes I really don't want to do it, but if we're going to do *Writing For Pleasure* projects or funner things I love it.' One said he 'only' enjoys writing when it is *Writing For Pleasure*, and finds all other writing 'boring'.

One particularly powerful observation came from a child who said that when she thinks about writing she thinks of 'a teacher telling you what to do but it is in your own words.' She also distinguished between this type of writing (which is unenjoyable) with having choice (equated with enjoyment).

Their responses also revealed negative feelings around marking and feedback in our 'business as usual' lessons, versus the pupil-conferencing which occurs in *Writing For Pleasure* projects (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)). Some children thought I was looking for mistakes when I was reading their writing: one wrote that I am looking for 'vocabulary and corrections' when I read



his work, and another said I'm looking for 'things to green highlight' (green highlighter is used to indicate a mistake). One child made her (rightful) dislike for this explicit with this response: 'Do you enjoy writing? Yes, because it lets me express my emotions and live in my own imaginary world. No, because when I get green highlighter I have to cross out something I like so I never feel my writing is MINE.'

This shows how problematic teacher marking was, and how it was having the total opposite effect it was meant to - instead of helping children, it was demotivating and disempowering. In contrast, pupil-conferencing helps the children in a way that is empowering and effective.

Results from surveys after the introduction of *Writing For Pleasure*

In contrast to the first writing surveys (in September 2021), there was no mention of writing as boring in the second writing surveys (in April 2022). I think this is arguably due to the fundamental principle of topic choice in the *Writing For Pleasure* projects; children are taught how to choose and write on topics which interest them most (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)).

Overall, the children's responses were much more positive after completing two *Writing For Pleasure* projects.

- More children indicated that they were now writing at home,
- 100% of children thought that they 'often' or 'sometimes' have a choice about what they write,
- 100% of them thought that I personally write 'always' or at least 'often' outside of school.

Most importantly, there was lots of mention of enjoyment of writing - more than 10 children mentioned this explicitly. There was no mention of not enjoying my feedback (and green pen) this time around.

I think these responses are due to a variety of teaching practices I introduced. I think it's mainly due to the fact that I was writing at the beginning of every lesson; thinking aloud and discussing my choices. I would ask their opinion on my *craft* choices. My writing was genuine. I showed my exhilaration and frustration, and talked openly about the challenges I find with writing. Also, during the pupil-conferencing, I would reference difficulties with my own compositions to share vulnerabilities or something I'd found helpful in the mini lessons I'd previously taught.

For example, "I enjoy writing because I love learning.", "I get excited because writing is my passion. It is my favourite thing to do.", "What goes through your head: "Yay writing one of the best things." , "I love writing", "What goes through your head: "Yes I want to do this." "It is so fun", "What goes through your head: "YES, writing my favourite". "It lets me express myself through words.", "I am really excited... It is really fun and enjoyable", "Happy because I love writing."

I also identified a theme of writing being seen as 'therapeutic'. This seemed particularly important for those children with additional learning needs or had a lot going on at home. One child, who is currently assigned a social worker and is a CIN, talked about how writing made her 'feel calm, and took her to her happy place'. She wrote 'I really enjoy getting all of my stress and anger, I do writing to calm me at home.' This is in keeping with the findings of a recent National Literacy Trust survey into children's writing habits during lockdown (Clark et al. [2021](#)).

Similarly, three of the children in my class who are in the process of being diagnosed with SEND, and who are working significantly below the level of the year group, were incredibly enthusiastic in their responses in the second survey. These are children who traditionally struggle to access the Year 5 writing curriculum, and two of whom are particularly difficult to motivate and who find being in the classroom quite stressful. These two children both mention our *Writing For Pleasure* projects explicitly ('what goes through my head is journals' and 'you get to do whatever you like'). For all three of these children, the *Writing For Pleasure* projects have had a hugely positive impact on their self esteem, particularly after sharing their work during 'Author's Chair' (Harris [2020](#)).

However, I did still have some children with negative responses. Interestingly, they were all from my most experienced writers. There was mention of 'frustration', 'stress', 'it hurts my brain' and 'I don't like it'. There was also explicit mention of 'a deadline' being stressful.

On reflection, I think some of this response can be explained by me sometimes neglecting these students who are more competent writers, and thus who I (wrongly) assumed had more robust attitudes around their writing. I tend to focus more on my less experienced writers during writing lessons. It has also made me think very carefully about how to give constructive, *empowering* feedback - I think perhaps with some of my 'greater-depth' writers, I may have been slightly less sensitive with my feedback, thinking that they were more confident and that feedback could be quicker, so I could focus on struggling writers. I think this response could be addressed by giving these children more specific, positive praise (Ferguson & Young [2021](#)).

In fact classes' responses as a collective have reinforced my belief in the power of positive, specific praise. I think I do this much more with my least experienced writers, thus they feel more positive about writing, and I need to do this more consistently with all writers in my class.

My actions for next year

My first, immediate action is to stop using green highlighter when I mark their compositions. Now I only use pink highlighter (to indicate that I felt something was effective/done really well), and use my verbal feedback through conferencing to discuss the potential for their pieces and possible improvements they can make. Furthermore, instead of going around while they are writing and correcting their spellings, I give them time at the end of writing time to look at their manuscripts and see if there are any words they think they may have misspelt (what we call 'unsure spellings'). Once they have done this, they have time to use different strategies to check the spellings (use a dictionary, ask a friend, ask the teacher) and I work together with children who need extra support doing this.

I'm going to try addressing children's feelings of 'stress' around deadlines by bringing them more into the conversation. We can decide together what we feel is a suitable amount of time to get certain writing processes done. For example, 'do you think we need an extra session for proof-reading?', 'do we think we could get our drafts finished by Thursday - OK - let's *aim* for that'. I'm also going to plan a mini-lesson where I share how other writers manage their process and set themselves deadlines (Young et al. [2021](#)).

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