

Writing non-fiction with heart and voice



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

Welcome to a place where anyone can have a 'once upon a time'. I am your tour guide in this world of written daydreams. I will help you find out who Ariel's love actually married and who Thumbelina really is...

The Hans holding the pen. *Hans Andersen was a Danish author in the 1880s ...He wrote many stories which you probably still know today...You should definitely try to find them and read them for yourselves!*

Happily ever after... *My last word on this topic is that I believe everyone is starting to forget the wonders of books. Fairytales might be works of fiction, but their authors always make sure there is some truth inside the story.*

- Extract from a Year 5 pupil's information text

In this article we show how children's use of their personal, authentic 'voice' can transform the quality of their writing of non-fiction texts, and how it can benefit and bring pleasure to both writer and reader. This is what we mean by 'voice':

- It's the sense of your personal presence.
- It's how you express your identity in your writing.
- It connects reader and writer.
- It's what invites readers to listen to you and get to know you.
- It's writing in personal response to what you're learning.

Factual writing doesn't always have to be written in an objective and impersonal way. There are different types of nonfiction texts (see [here](#) for more details). The high-quality texts in your class library will prove the truth of this.

Research about children's relationship to the genre of non-fiction suggests that, in general, they prefer reading the kinds of text which are written in rich language and with a strong voice ([LINK](#)). It is therefore reasonable to assume that they would like to write their own non-fiction texts in this way too. So how could we, as teachers, give them the freedom to do this?

It's our view that we need to go deeper than simply providing children with powerful [craft instruction](#) and [the best models](#) in the form of mentor texts. Of course, both of these are of paramount importance, but if children are to write non-fiction using an authentic personal voice, we also need to create other, vital conditions which will enable them to undertake their writing with feelings of self- efficacy, pleasure and a sense of empowerment.

Children will, we hope, feel confident about how to write conventionally in all the genres of non-fiction because they will have [learned the typical features](#) from their teachers during their class writing projects. We do not diminish the importance of this. However, the following conditions must also be created if children's authentic voices are to enter the writing. They should:

- have agency over the topic they want to write about, within the parameter of the genre set by the teacher [\[LINK\]](#)
- have their own reasons to write, asking themselves 'What is my reason for wanting to write this piece? What do I want this writing to do? Who are my readers going to be? What do I want them to feel when they read my writing?' [\[LINK\]](#)

- know that they can have more than one reason to write [[LINK](#)]
- understand that they can write in personal response to a topic, particularly when writing in the wider curriculum [[LINK](#)].

Agency

Agency is one of the strongest affective needs a young writer has. Research tells us that all children experience significant motivational and cognitive benefits attached to being able to write about what they know and are interested in (Young & Ferguson 2021, [LINK](#)). It comes as no surprise to learn that being personally and emotionally invested in the topic, combined with writing from the strong position of having previous knowledge about it, means that children produce more successful texts. It also invites them to bring their own voice into the piece. And of course, in keeping with current requirements, we would point out that children are better able to write these texts independently.

Every single child has something they can write about, but sometimes they need help to find their idea. We have provided strategies for showing children how to mine their own funds of knowledge for a writing topic, and you can read about them here [[LINK](#)]. We cannot stress strongly enough that it is of the utmost importance for children to know that their teacher will value and validate the topics they choose. If they cannot be confident of this, they will not want to risk letting their own voice enter the writing.

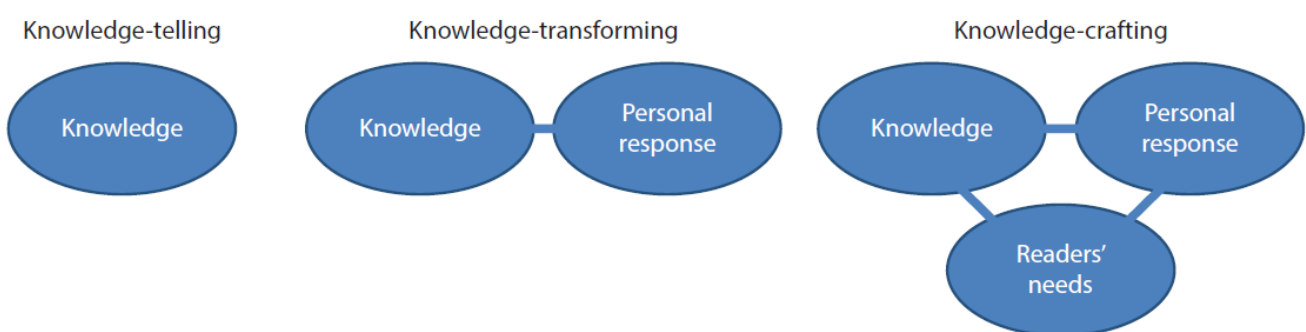
Reasons to write

Children need to know why they want to write their piece, or as we like to say, why they are *moved* to write [[LINK](#)]. They must have a clear idea of their own authentic purpose, who their specific intended readers are beyond their teacher, and what experience they want these readers to have. Do they want to teach, entertain, persuade, make a record of something that shouldn't be forgotten, be reflective, or simply paint with words?

Teachers can help children develop this kind of awareness when they together [discuss a whole variety of mentor texts](#), looking not just at the surface linguistic features which carry voice, but also underneath, at the possible motivations of the different authors. Children need to know, too, that they can be moved to write for more than one reason, as the text at the beginning of this article clearly shows. This writer was out to: teach by showcasing his own expert knowledge of his topic, including being intertextual by drawing on the styles of other texts; entertain his readers by performing and punning; draw his readers in through direct address; venture an opinion, and offer a personal reflection about what he saw as the declining appeal of fairytales. The result of combining these purposes was a rich and enjoyable hybrid text written in his own authentic voice - and at greater depth.

Personal Response

The impact of writing in personal response to a factual topic and in your own voice and form is particularly well illustrated by considering what *could*, in the best case scenario, happen when children are writing in the wider curriculum.



(The different ways young writers can share knowledge through writing. Taken from Young & Ferguson 2021)

If learning in the wider curriculum is to be meaningful, children need first to absorb the information they have been given. When (as often happens) they are asked simply to write out this information, much as it has been given, and for no reason beyond showing their teacher that they have 'learned' something, this corresponds to the 'knowledge-telling' part of the above diagram. Although the text they produce may show that they have 'comprehended' the information at a surface level, it will have little *value* as a piece of writing. This isn't to say that knowledge-telling isn't valuable. It is. We do it all the time. But in the context of this particular article, it is the least useful.

If the process does not stop here, but children are given time and the scope to meditate on the information, relate it to their own lives, think what it reminds them of, work out their thoughts and feelings about it, speculate, ask themselves questions about it and make their own meanings, they will be engaging in the *knowledge-transforming* part of the process - transforming it in their minds into something new.

They can then express and share their new knowledge, their personal response, by *crafting* it into writing for others to read, which is the final stage of the process. It's interesting to note that research shows that, if this happens, not only do children write better quality texts but they retain the original information more securely (Young & Ferguson [2021](#)).

If children are invited to go beyond knowledge-telling, to knowledge-transform and then knowledge-craft in their own voice and in their own chosen form they will in effect be *writing to learn* rather than simply writing to repeat information. Because each writer will be offering an individual perspective on the topic, the texts, read collectively, will express a variety of different voices and understandings which everyone can share and consider, and in the process deepen their own comprehension of the subject. We can say this is producing 'community knowledge'.

More than this, their texts can be a social resource. You will learn so much more about your children from hearing their writing voices, and they will learn more about each other too.