



# Motivating Writing Teaching



**Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson**



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

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# 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](http://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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## Preface

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 [2024](#)).

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](#), [2024](#)). 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](#), [2024](#)). We were no longer going to leave things to chance.

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 [2024](#)).

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 by *reading as writers*. 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

# Why writing motivation?

*‘Children want to write’*

- Donald Graves

Motivation matters. Especially, in the writing classroom<sup>1</sup>.

When students are motivated to write, they pay more attention, put in more effort, persist for longer, and are able to write more independently.

Motivated writers bring care and commitment to their writing. Motivating writing teaching is by its definition effective teaching. Children who receive such practice are more likely to learn more.

When pupils lack writing motivation, they get distracted more easily, they do the bare minimum to get by, they avoid taking any risks that might make their writing more successful, they require constant cajoling and policing to stay on track, and they retain very little of what they learn.

Motivation influences the behaviour, learning, and life chances of our pupils. It is something we should be striving to influence.

## Clarity and complexity

Currently, writing motivation varies widely. The National Literacy Trust has shown that levels of writing motivation alarmingly decline as children get older. The majority of students leave school with less motivation to write than when they entered<sup>2</sup>. This is a scandal.

Our struggle to motivate young writers is partly due to the profession's lack of clarity on the subject. We know that motivating writers can make the difference. However, it is not something that is easily understood. This is because it is not only complex (covering aspects of cognition, psychology and sociology) but also largely invisible.

It is its ability to cross multiple fields of study while simultaneously staying elusive that makes writing motivation so difficult to pin down. Couple this with the many (often overlapping) motivation theories that are now out there, and it becomes a real challenge. However, with this said, there have been recent attempts to bring some kind of clarity and order to the concept of writing motivation<sup>3</sup>.

The aim for this book is to tease out the most powerful insights that currently exist in the field, codify them in ways we can talk about them easily, and translate them into effective teaching practices which we can use and apply in our writing classrooms. This book wants to demystify what writing motivation means for schools so that more pupils can enjoy making writing and being writers.

## Motivating writing teaching

This book is the result of many years spent trying to understand children and young people's writing motivation. This includes years teaching, writing and talking with children about writing and being writers.

The ambition for this book is to bring together the best research evidence<sup>4</sup> and create a coherent framework that can be used by teachers and schools to boost their chances of nurturing motivated writers.

Influenced by the work of Peps Mccrea and his book *Motivated Teaching*, the chapters of this book are organised around **five core drivers** of writing motivation. Before we start, it would be good to have a clear and common definition of what writing motivation is and how it works.

“Writing motivation is what drives a writer to begin and maintain their attention on writing. It blends together their motives, perceptions and identity and affects their willingness to participate in being a writer.”

## Motivation as investment

If we want to have an influence on pupils' writing motivation, we've first got to understand it. Ultimately, writing motivation is students' willingness to engage and maintain their attention on their writing and on their development as a writer. However, in the context of the classroom, there are lots of things that compete for their attention. When faced with a variety of alternatives, how do we ensure that our pupils choose writing? This is where motivating writing teaching comes in.

### Should I invest?

When students are invited to write, they come to a decision on whether they really want to invest their time and energy into a class writing project. There are three concepts which will influence pupils' decision making here.<sup>5</sup>

1. **Value** Does this writing project hold personal value for me? Alternatively, will it be useful to me or to other people I value?
2. **Cost** How much effort am I going to have to put in? Is it going to be worth it?
3. **Expectancy** How likely am I to succeed?

Writing projects which offer the greatest value, highest chances for success, but the lowest *feeling* of cost are the sorts of writing projects that pupils will be attracted to. The more invested students are - the more likely they are to persist with their writing when times get tough.

When weighing up how likely they are to succeed, pupils will draw on their previous writerly experiences. Alternatively, they might rely on the influence of their teacher and peers. If *they* seem confident in the project's success, they are more likely to feel that way too.<sup>6</sup>

One of the challenges of developing students' writing motivation is that different students can come to different conclusions about whether they wish to invest their attention into a writing project. With this in mind, how do we make our writing units as attractive an opportunity for our pupils as possible?

### The always motivated writer?

The idea of a fully motivated writer is unlikely. Instead, students' writing motivation will be determined by the decisions they make in response to the varying writing projects we offer them across the academic year and their entire schooling. This means pupils' writerly motivation can differ and fluctuate depending on the nature and context of these writing units.<sup>7</sup> For example, it's possible that:

- **Purpose and genre** A pupil can be highly motivated to write a story and be far less motivated to write a biography about Queen Victoria.
- **Audience** A student might be motivated to write something for their friends to read and far less motivated to write for the sole purposes of their teacher's evaluation.
- **Writing processes** A student might be highly motivated to draft a personal narrative but far less motivated to proof-read it.
- **Writing strategies** A pupil might be highly motivated to use drawing as a planning technique and far less motivated to use a graphic organiser.
- **Environment** A student might be highly motivated to write over a number of sessions and alongside their friends but far less motivated to write in isolation and in a single sitting.

The difficulty here is that schools and writing curriculums are not always designed to help teachers attend to these differences.<sup>8</sup> Schools are obliged to teach, and children are required to learn, things about writing that feel effortful and their value may not always be immediately clear to individual pupils (or even teachers!). And while some pupils hold feelings of natural curiosity around writing, without utilising evidence-based teaching practices, writing motivation is known to quickly disappear.

A failure to employ motivated writing teaching can leave pupils with a sense of apathy (or even disdain) towards writing, despite having spent multiple years learning and engaging with it. A motivation to write (and to learn about writing) is something the vast majority of young children first arrive at school with. Then something happens. They leave disliking it. There is something seriously wrong going on here and we need to figure out what it is.



## The five core drivers

If we want to turn the tide on students' lack of writing motivation, and their associated underperformance, then we need to influence how our pupils view the class writing projects we offer them.

To achieve this, we must create a positive culture and environment around being writers and provide students with many positive, valuable and successful writerly experiences. Students must consider writing and being a writer as something valuable and associate themselves with having a strong and consistent track-record of writerly success.

There are a number of well-known instructional practices that exceptional teachers of writing use to create such a culture and over the next few chapters we will explore these approaches.

There are **five core drivers** that make up our 'motivation for writing' framework.

- The first is **success**. This is about teaching in such a way that we can give students confidence that they will be successful.
- Next, is **culture**. This is social in nature. It's about how the attitudes, routines and actions of the classroom and school environment influence pupils' view of writing and being a writer.
- Then we have **motives**. This is about students locating what is *moving* them to write and *why* they are bothering.
- After, we have **identity**. This is about building up a bank of positive past experiences with being a writer. Linked to this identity is a student's self-concept and their long-standing writerly self-esteem.
- Finally, we have **buy-in**. This is how we can attend to students' interests, preferences, and provide them with a sense of choice and control.



*The five core drivers of  
writing motivation*

Together, these drivers provide a framework for action that all teachers can use to build pupils' writing motivation. They take the best of motivational psychology and match it beautifully to evidence-based teaching practices.

The next five chapters of this book explore each of these drivers in detail.

Readers may notice that two common strategies are absent from our framework:

- **Making lessons fun** We consider gimmicky lessons to be the writerly equivalent of giving children a 'sugar rush hit'. You get a sudden and temporary increase in engagement from children but it soon wears off. Then comes the crash. Fun lessons are fine but they are no substitute for a well-balanced motivational diet based on these five core drivers.
- **Offering cheap extrinsic rewards** For example, giving sweets, stickers or certificates to those who produce 'the best writing'. The problem is not so much rewards themselves, it's what happens to students once these motivators no longer exist?

We don't want to come across as miserable! Having fun is an important part of school and life. However, these strategies can only ever be a temporary solution. They are sticking plasters which are often hiding what's the real issue with a school's writing pedagogy (a lack of the five core drivers).

Fun lessons and cheap rewards either wear off or become a distraction from what it is we are really trying to instil in our students, namely long-lasting intrinsic motivation.

At their worst, such extrinsic motivators can have a negative impact on students' writing motivation.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the teaching strategies shared throughout this book are going to drive pupils to be motivated life-long writers. They have a laser-sharp focus on attracting students' attention towards writing and being a writer. We want these practices to be used as much as possible and kept in place for as long as possible.

## Effective implementation

The five drivers are not a sequence. They can't be deployed in an order. Instead, they are interconnected and so will naturally support one another.

It's also important to say that their absence can *reduce* students' writing motivation. For example, if pupils routinely receive a writerly apprenticeship which doesn't feel valuable, is cognitively costly, and leaves them feeling like they regularly fail, they are likely to feel unmotivated.

Motivated writing teaching is a long-term approach. Teachers often see changes very quickly. However, for some pupils, it can take more time.

Finally, writing at school is a highly social enterprise. This means that the culture and environment a school creates will have either a consistent positive or negative effect on how writing motivation develops in your classroom. This means building writing motivation is a collective effort.

### Summary

- Writing motivation influences students' behaviour, learning and wellbeing.
- It is complex and largely invisible which makes it hard to investigate and understand.
- To influence pupils' writing motivation, we must draw on both educational research and motivational psychology.
- Motivation is what we decide to focus our attention on.
- Students allocate their attention to class writing projects based on its value, the amount of effort they are going to have to put in, and their chances of success.
- Students' writing motivation can vary depending on the nature of the writing project.
- Writing motivation is something we must actively try and maintain as pupils get older.
- We can develop students' writing motivation by applying the five drivers of writing motivation.

### Notes and further reading

1. For a more detailed explanation of the link between writing and motivation see *Writing For Pleasure* by Young & Ferguson [\[LINK\]](#)
2. See The National Literacy Trust's annual writing surveys. For example, *Children and young people's writing in 2023* [\[LINK\]](#)
3. Read more about the challenges in defining writing motivation, see *Writing motivation in school* by Ana Camacho and colleagues [\[LINK\]](#)
4. To read the research evidence for yourself (and for free), see Young & Ferguson's *Handbook of research on teaching young writers* [\[LINK\]](#)
5. For more on expectancy, value, cost theory in relation to writing, see *Relationships between writing motivation, writing activity, and writing performance* [\[LINK\]](#), *writing and motivation* [\[LINK\]](#), and *motivation to write* [\[LINK\]](#)
6. This is also known as collective efficacy and/or situational motivation. See *More motivating than cherry pie?* [\[LINK\]](#) and *The impact of a changed writing environment on students' motivation to write* [\[LINK\]](#)

7. For more on the idea that students' writing motivation can be subject to change, depending on the context and nature of the task, see Alves-Wold and colleagues' work [\[LINK\]](#)
8. For more on person-centred writing motivation, see *Reflexive writing dialogues: Elementary students' perceptions and performances as writers during classroom experiences* [\[LINK\]](#)
9. For more on the pros and cons of using extrinsic motivators in the writing classroom see *The bright and dark side of writing motivation* [\[LINK\]](#)

**In *Motivating Writing Teaching*, writer-teachers Ross Young and Felicity Ferguson share what writing motivation is, how it develops, and how to cultivate it in your classroom or school.**

**From the authors of *The Science Of Teaching Primary Writing* and *Writing For Pleasure*, this latest publication provides an actionable framework based on the five drivers of writing motivation:**

- 1. Setting up success**
- 2. Creating a writing culture**
- 3. Mobilising motives**
- 4. Instilling writer-identity**
- 5. Boosting buy-in**

**This practical framework will help your pupils care more about crafting quality writing and develop them as volitional, motivated and independent writers.**