

Developing motivated and successful writers in the EYFS



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

When Nursery-aged children like [Wyatt](#) and [Hudson](#) are invited to write their first ever books, they can hesitate. This is until their teacher encourages them by explaining that the books they read to them are also created by people just like them - implying that they can do the same. In Wyatt's case, it was his teacher sharing their own book-making that did the trick. Energised by the idea that they can make books, both Hudson & Wyatt enthusiastically spent time crafting their texts: *Avengers Assemble*, *Alligators and Crocodiles* & *Untitled*. After finishing their books, both proudly read them aloud to anyone who would listen, using their illustrations and [emergent writing](#) to narrate their stories and following their text with their fingers as they 'read'. Such successful and profound initial experiences with being a writer can spark sustained interest with children often 'catching the bug' of book-making.

Research shows that providing young children with daily opportunities to write helps them see themselves as capable writers, developing skills for intellectual, academic, and social purposes while building their foundational reading and oral language skills. Writing enables children to be experts, explore social roles, expand their imaginative play, adopt new identities, and share personal experiences. Encouraging practices like [informed spelling](#) and constructive feedback enhances their understanding of phonological awareness, letter names and sounds. This improves both their reading and writing. Motivated writers like Hudson & Wyatt are persistent, strategic, and happy in their work - traits consistently linked to academic success and personal growth [\[LINK\]](#).

Sadly, despite its effectiveness, book-making is uncommon in Nursery and Reception classrooms. While writing materials are made available in the writing corner, children can spend minimal time writing there. In Nurseries & Reception classes, writing is generally confined to small portions of literacy instruction, focusing solely on things like *letter formation* and *dictation* rather than *also* encouraging children to use and apply this developing transcriptional knowledge to book-making. However, some teachers are taking a more rigorous and research-informed approach, as observed in the work of:

- *Already Ready: Nurturing Writers in Preschool and Kindergarten* by Katie Wood Ray & Matt Glover [\[LINK\]](#)
- *A Teacher's Guide to Getting Started with Beginning Writers* by Katie Wood Ray & Lisa Cleaveland [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Learning To Write And Loving It!* by Miriam Trehearne [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Getting Children Up & Running As Writers* by Ross Young & Felicity Ferguson [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Kid Writing In The 21st Century* by Eileen Feldgus, Isabell Cardonick and Richard Gentry [\[LINK\]](#)
- *About The Authors* by Katie Wood Ray & Lisa Cleaveland [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Never Too Early To Write* by Bea Johnson [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Helping Children Become Readers Through Writing* by Arlene Schulze [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Understanding and Supporting Young Writers from Birth to 8* by Noella Mackenzie & Janet Scull [\[LINK\]](#)
- *Handbook On The Science Of Early Literacy* by Sonia Cabell, Susan Neuman and Nicole Terry [\[LINK\]](#)

These teachers provide:

- **Whole-class and small group direct instruction** - Teach children something about writing and being a writer on the carpet. This includes, but isn't limited to, teaching about letter formation and encoding strategies.
- **Whole-class and small group modelling** - Share with their class their own book-making. Will write/model/teach alongside small groups of children during book-making time.
- **Self-initiated writing opportunities** - Devote time and resources to establishing and maintaining a writing centre. Will explicitly model how resources from the writing centre can be used throughout the provision.

For young children to engage in writing (and being a writer), it is essential to create a community of writers which makes writing both appealing and meaningful. While writing centres are common in EYFS classrooms, some children rarely (if ever) choose writing over other activities, especially when their writerly experiences have been limited to rote practices like letter formation and handwriting drills, which (unsurprisingly) can fail to capture their interest.

To motivate children to write, they need to see writing as [playful](#), achievable and purposeful. To develop children's motivation for writing, we need to address three basic human needs:

1. **Competency:** Children must feel capable of successfully *engaging* in being a writer.
2. **Autonomy:** They should have opportunities to make their own authorial decisions and express themselves freely in their writing.
3. **Relatedness:** Writing should connect with their personal interests and should be a social and playful experience.

One effective way to meet these needs is through class writing projects, such as creating picture books (for example units, follow this [LINK](#)). This approach allows children to experience self-determination while fostering deep engagement, making writing both enjoyable and rewarding.

Supporting young writers' sense of competence is critical for encouraging them to engage in and persist with writing. Inviting children to create picturebooks is particularly effective, as it utilises a familiar format and aligns with [young children's natural writing process](#). This approach builds confidence by showing children that they can create books in ways similar to published authors, expanding the definition of what it means to be a competent writer.

Strategies for building young children's sense of competency

- **Use picturebooks as models:** Picturebooks serve as mentor texts ([LINK](#) for more on this). By looking at them, they can teach us things about writing. Their combination of images and words mirrors young children's own meaning-making methods, such as [drawing](#) and [writing](#) on each page. Early on in the year, before you've formally introduced phonics lessons, wordless picturebooks are especially supportive, demonstrating that illustrations alone can tell a story or teach someone something, empowering children who are not yet writing *conventionally* to still participate in book-making.
- **Value children's emergent writing and informed spellings:** Encouraging children to add emergent writing to their books, even before mastering sound-symbol relationships, helps them feel competent. For instance, [Wyatt](#) confidently added '[kid writing](#)' to his illustrations so that he could 'read/tell' you his book. Expecting correct letter formation or critiquing children's spelling attempts too early and too harshly can undermine their confidence, whereas affirming their efforts nurtures their motivation ([LINK](#) for more on whether teachers should write under children's attempts). Book-making is no fun when you know you are only going to be criticised for your efforts.
- **Providing feedback that is developmentally appropriate:** Effective verbal feedback begins by celebrating what a child has already demonstrated they know. For example, commenting on [Hudson's](#) inclusion of letters - "I see why you put letters on the page; authors do that too" - acknowledges his effort and provides a bridge to future learning. [Underwriting](#), alongside the child, is a great way to move that feedback forward and teach a child something new about writing and being a writer. However, avoid making demands that are developmentally inappropriate. Make sure your feedback is actionable.
- **Modelling and scaffolding:** Teachers should model their own 'book-making life' by demonstrating their own writing processes. For example, how *they* used to use a sound mat when they were their pupils' age, how *they* used emergent writing, and how *they* used to 'tell' their picture to a friend before writing about it. Other examples include: modelling how *you're* going to do all the pictures for *your* book before you write about them afterwards or how *you* are going to use speech bubbles in your book just like Allan Ahlberg does. You can then invite children to use the exact same techniques that you modelled during that day's daily book-making time too.

Strategies for supporting children's autonomy

Supporting a young writer's sense of autonomy is crucial for developing their motivation and engagement. Autonomy, or the feeling that a child is in control of their writing, is best nurtured when children are invited to make decisions about the content and style of their picturebooks. It can be detrimental to impose rigid themes, such as requiring all children to write about the same topic (e.g. wild animals) or asking them to choose from a narrow set of teacher-imposed options, as this restricts their creativity and makes writing feel less motivating. Children are more engaged when they can pursue topics that are meaningful to them, like writing a story about a slime monster or an information text about all the reasons to love *Elsa* from Frozen.

However, understandably, some young writers can find complete freedom (and a lack of support) overwhelming. It's important to recognise that the process of figuring out what to write about takes time and your teachers and friends can help you! That's why we recommend having [Ideas Parties](#) together as a whole class ([LINK](#) for more on this). Children learn by listening to their peers and thinking about their favourite published authors ideas, and through discussions with their teacher about how to choose their best writing topics. Prior to an [Ideas Party](#), teachers can put aside a number of sessions to expose their pupils to a variety of picturebooks, helping them broaden their understanding of what's possible when book-making ([LINK](#) for more).



Here's an example of Nursery children in Marcela Vasques' class being invited to have an Ideas Party.

Gentle nudges and enthusiasm for certain ideas can help guide children without diminishing their own autonomy. For example, if a child regularly enjoys playing *shark attacks!* at the water table, you might suggest that they could make a book about it. This kind of suggestion, rooted in the child's own interests and funds-of-knowledge, can inspire them to take ownership of their picturebook.

Strategies for supporting children's writerly relationships

A young writer's motivation is greatly influenced by their sense of relatedness - feeling happy and connected to the readers of their picturebooks. For children, strong relationships, especially with teachers, peers, family, and caregivers are crucial to their motivation. When children feel cared for by their writerly teachers and friends, they tend to have higher self-esteem, better school engagement, and improved well-being. This was evident in Hudson's and Wyatt's positive experiences with their teachers, who fostered a supportive and social classroom environment that helped them thrive in their writing. In contrast, a child who makes books alone in silence or is asked to engage in less meaningful writing activities will find themselves disconnected from the community of writers in their classroom and can struggle to stay motivated as a result.

Hudson's interactions with his teacher and friends are characterised by her role as a supportive *reader* rather than always 'the corrector'. She showed a genuine enthusiasm and interest in his book! She was playful. For example, Hudson's unexpected inclusion of a pigeon from Mo Willems' books in his story about alligators and crocodiles was met with readerly excitement, not correction. The relaxed, respectful dynamic between them both created a secure space for Hudson to be a successful bookmaker.

While competency, autonomy, and relatedness are distinct needs, they must be met simultaneously for a child to be a happy and academically successful writer. For instance, children who are given complete autonomy but lack the instruction and modelling to develop their competency may become overwhelmed and fearful. Similarly, a child who has strong writing skills but feels disconnected or anxious during writing time may have trouble focusing on a class writing project. Therefore, fostering all three needs - competence, autonomy, and relatedness - is key to sustaining a child's writing success.

How do you plan writing lessons?

It's important to create a supportive community of writers that integrates reading with talking and making books. This combination forms a powerful research-based teaching practice. By viewing book-making time as a place where people gather together around a shared interest or common activity, teachers can maximise the likelihood that children will enjoy and commit to being writers too. In such a space, all children, regardless of age or expertise, can write together happily. This dynamic encourages social interaction and helps elevate children's book-making. In the classroom, this concept can be applied by connecting shared picturebook reading with daily opportunities for children to create their own books too.

Reading as writers

Shared picturebook reading offers a powerful opportunity for young children to connect with books and enhance their writing skills [[LINK](#) for more]. By engaging in repeated, interactive read-alouds, children respond naturally to stories or information texts, which can inspire them to think critically about the kind of books they would like to make too. A first reading should allow children to react freely, while a second reading should focus on the decisions made by the author and illustrator, helping children understand how they can do these things in their books!

In addition to picturebooks, incorporating list books (also known as board books or baby books) is important at the start of the year, as these are the types of texts children are usually exposed to prior to coming to Nursery or Reception. Bilingual children, in particular, can benefit from such books that emphasise visuals, helping them build understanding and motivation [[LINK](#) for more on using list books]. Lastly, connecting the work of professional authors with young writers reinforces the idea that they share the same *kind* of practices with adult authors. Teachers can highlight cool [craft moves](#) in picturebooks before encouraging children to give it a try in their own books that day. In the process, a sense of empowerment and connection between reading and writing is born.

Book-making is playful and social

I will never forget asking a Reception child what book-making was. He replied: "It's when we get to play writing with our friends". Social writing spaces provide young children with valuable opportunities to develop their oral language and listening comprehension - not to mention social skills like collaboration and learning from one another.

Let's define what we mean by oral language development and then consider how much language learning takes place before children enter formal schooling.

Talking	The ability to express one's own thoughts and feelings.
Reciting	Repeating aloud a text from memory.
Writing	The activity or occupation of composing text for publication.
Dictating	The transcription of someone else's spoken text.
Developing children's oral language	The development of children's own communication using speech and/or writing.

Age	Typical language milestones
Eighteen months old	At eighteen months old, children already have a vocabulary of around fifty words.
Two years old	By two years old, most children produce utterances of two words. These utterances are crafted by the child and are not the parroting back of an adult model. Speech and thought come together by the age of two.
Two and a half	Can utter sentences of three words.
Between three and four years olds	Begin speaking in full sentences. Children can say an infinite number of original sentences – sentences that they've never said or heard before.
Five years old	Children are able to use language with a capacity close to that of an adult. For example they use language for the following purposes: to persuade, influence or command others; to share and understand information; to tell stories (both real and imagined) and use language imaginatively and playfully. Children can typically say and write sentences of around five words.
From seven years old	Children usually acquire a full and accurate knowledge of their first language.

As you can see, every single child brings a great deal of language learning into the classroom on their very first day of Nursery or Reception. However, this learning can often be underestimated or overlooked by many who work in education. Research shows that children are most likely to succeed in schools that use and value this existing knowledge and build on it.

Children's development as talkers relies on 'a conversational context'. Children's language develops when they are given the cognitive responsibility to use it. Ultimately, children must be the ones to construct their own speech and writing. Otherwise, they learn little. The acquisition of language is a dynamic and creative process, not the passive reciting and copying of someone else's model.

Children's talk and writing should be developed concurrently. Children must engage in **egocentric talk**, talking aloud to themselves as they write. They also need to write alongside and in happy **dialogue** with their teacher and peers. This means it's necessary for children to play a daily and active role in their own talk and writing construction. They should also learn about speech and text construction from being 'overhearers' to their peers' talk, help and instruction. In addition, children can engage in what we call **parallel writing** and **co-operative writing**, where they participate daily in the kind of activities listed below. Remember, children will talk with one another *before* they write, *as* they write and *after* they write. These interactions occur in different ways and can include:

- **Idea explaining** Children share what they plan to write about during the session with others.
- **Idea sharing** Children work in pairs or small 'clusters' to co-construct their own texts together.
- **Idea spreading** One pupil mentions an idea to their group. Children then leapfrog on the idea and create their own texts in response too.
- **Supplementary ideas** Children hear about a child's idea, like it, and incorporate it into the text they are already writing.
- **Communal text rehearsal** Children say out loud what they are about to write – others listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Personal text rehearsal** Children talk to themselves about what they are about to write down. This may include encoding individual words aloud. Other children might listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Text checking** Children tell or read back what they've written so far and others listen in, comment, offer support or give feedback.
- **Performance** Children share their texts with each other as an act of celebration and publication (see [LINK](#) for more details on this).
- **Talk to support children's encoding** - It takes a lot of cognitive energy for children to take the phonemes of their speech and present them as graphemes of written language; otherwise called [encoding](#). Encoding, fluency and automaticity in writing can only really come if children are 'talking aloud to themselves' and writing meaningfully and for a sustained period every day. Until that happens, children are relying on their working memory which leaves them with little space to consider the more complex compositional and transcriptional aspects of writing. As a result, their academic progress suffers (for more on developing children's writing fluency, see this [LINK](#)).

To encourage children's oral language development, some teaching about book-making followed by an invitation to write should be a consistent part of your daily schedule.

Don't delay. Introduce book-making on their very first day

To introduce bookmaking effectively, it's helpful to begin on the very first day. It's all about modelling how and why you book-make before inviting the children to give it a try for themselves. Some teachers like to introduce book-making to a few children at a time until the whole class is familiar with the process. This approach creates a growing group of 'experts' who can assist and guide the newer book-makers. To reduce any confusion, show examples of books made by other children previously. In addition, show children the sorts of books *you* used to make (or would have made *at their age* if you had been given the opportunity). Clearly explain the routines, materials needed, and where to find them, helping children feel prepared and confident to engage in the bookmaking process. For more on this, see our book: *Getting Children Up & Running As Writers* [[LINK](#)].

Setting up your writing centre

As well as engaging in daily whole-class writing instruction and modelling, you're going to find that your children will want to pursue their own additional self-initiated writing. This means you'll have to devote some time and resources to establishing and maintaining a writing centre. To create a community of writers, picturebooks (especially those from shared reading times) should be easily accessible to children in the writing area. These books can serve as tools and sources of inspiration for their own bookmaking.

Writing alongside children

Teachers should ensure that they write alongside a different group of children each day during book-making time. This allows you to observe, model and provide additional bespoke instruction and feedback to children while they are actually engaged in [the book-making process](#). This means you can celebrate the strategies children *are* using while still looking to move their writing forward by providing additional guidance and instruction. The goal is to book-make alongside your pupils rather than merely supervise from a cold distance!

Additionally, teachers should encourage collaboration among young writers by highlighting and sharing the strategies other children are using. By pointing out the techniques their friends are using, teachers help children see each other as valuable resources and members of a supportive writing community.

For more guidance, consider purchasing [Getting Your Class Up & Running As Writers](#) and [How To Teach Writing](#). Alternatively, you may wish to purchase one of our [EYFS unit plans](#). All our publications and unit plans are available for free to our members. To become a member, please just follow [this link](#).