

Enhancing your writing teaching: Insights from a metacognitive model



Original article: [LINK](#) | By Douglas J. Hacker

When children are in the writing classroom, their brains are like a busy workshop. They are builders and project managers who are crafting texts. An important part of crafting these texts is thinking. Here's what children are up to while they are writing:

Level 1: The doing

- Their brain gets to work coming up with writing ideas. They are thinking about what they want to write about and are planning it out.
- They then translate these ideas into thoughts, words, phrases and sentences in their mind before transcribing them to paper (or screen).
- They also look at what they've written and read it back to themselves.

We can also call this 'the doing'. They are the production strategies children use as they are writing. Here's a nice explanation taken from our publication [The Science Of Teaching Primary Writing](#):

Children's production strategies for writing

We have personified the production strategies used by children as if they are undertaken by four different people.

1. **The proposer.** It's their job to generate ideas in the mind (and on paper through drawings) and offer them to the translator.



2. **The translator.** It's their job to take those images and organise them into a plan, structure, phrases or sentences.



3. **The transcriber.** It's their job to take those phrases and sentences from the mind and put them down onto the paper or screen.



4. **The evaluator.** The evaluator reads and reviews the text as it is being crafted. They will also share their text regularly with others to gauge their reactions. Finally, they act as a motivator for their three friends above.



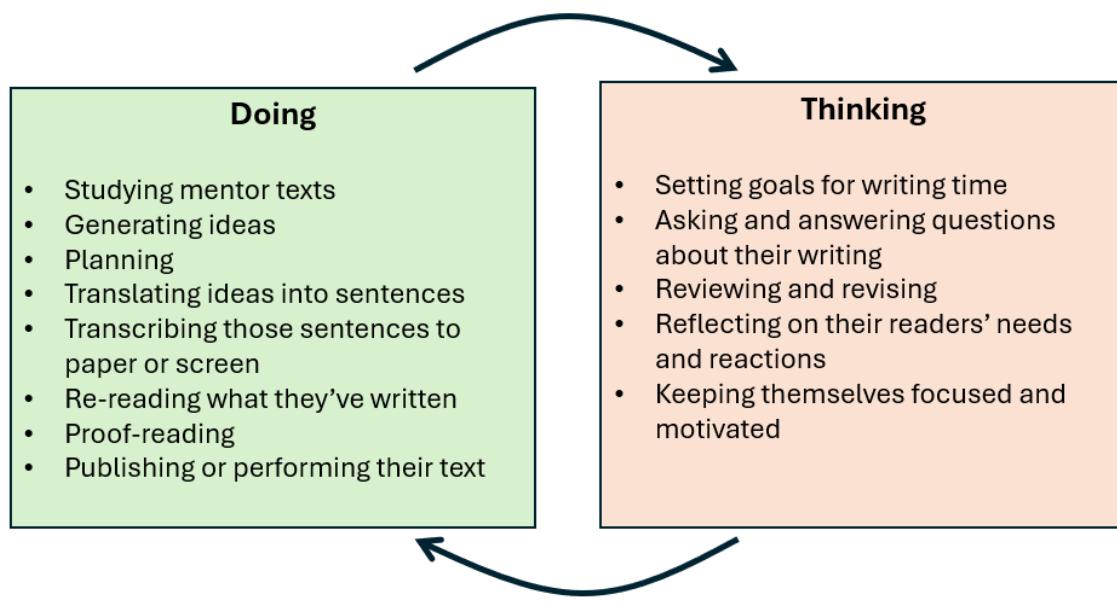
Level 2: The thinking

The thinking part of their writing process is acting like a project manager. It looks at what the "doing" part is doing. It thinks about the words they've written and the ideas they've shared.

They ask themselves questions like: *Does this make sense?*, *Is that the right word?* and *Will the person reading this understand me?*

Based on this thinking, they tell the "doing" part what to do next. They might say: *Change that word!*, *Add more details here!*, *Rub out that sentence!*, or *Let's try planning a bit more...!*

A metacognitive model for writing



(Adapted from Hacker 2018)

When we write, our brains are always doing this merry dance between the *doing* and the *thinking*. This goes on and on until we feel like our writing is finished. Children as young as three start doing this kind of thinking and doing while writing (see [here](#) for examples).

Scribbles and drawings are where they start. When they are starting out, children will make scribbles, letter-like shapes and drawings (see [here](#) for examples). They are already trying to translate their thoughts into marks. Learning that a written mark can stand in for a spoken word is a massive and profound step in children's thinking about language.

Writing helps children look closely at words. When they write, children are translating their thoughts into words. Writing lets children see these words. This helps them notice how words are built, how sentences go together, and how they need to use different words and sentences depending on the people they are writing for (This is called perspective taking and you can read more about it [here](#)). Writing helps children think about language itself.

Thinking about their writing helps children improve. The more children practice considering their ideas, turning those ideas into sentences, transcribing those sentences to paper, and revising them, the more fluent they become. As our [Writing Map](#) shows, writing fluency is a key factor in children's writing success.

Implications for classroom practice

According to our [Writing Map](#), when teachers embrace this metacognitive model for writing, they equip their students with the tools to produce high-quality texts. For example:

1. Explicitly teach children the writing processes: Planning class writing projects so that children work through the full writing process can help them develop a deeper understanding of both writing and what it means to be a writer. This helps them become better writers *and* thinkers.

- [Here](#) is a developmentally-appropriate writing process for children in the EYFS-KS1.
- [Here](#) is one for children in KS2.

2. Teach monitoring strategies: Encourage children to actively monitor their writing. This involves teaching strategies such as:

- Reading mentor texts [[LINK](#)]
- Regularly rereading and retelling your writing with teachers and friends [[LINK](#)]
- Formally reviewing their writing through revision checklist sessions [[LINK](#)].

3. Teach control strategies: Equip children with strategies that writers use to control their writing, including techniques for:

- Generating ideas [[LINK](#)]
- Planning [[LINK](#)]
- Translating thoughts into drawings before turning them into sentences [[LINK](#)]
- Drafting fluently [[LINK](#)]
- Proof-reading [[LINK](#)]

4. Encourage reflection and verbalisation: Provide regular opportunities for students to talk about their writing through ego-centric speech [[LINK](#)], verbal feedback [[LINK](#)], class sharing and *Author's Chair* [[LINK](#)].

5. Acknowledge and develop children's metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness: By teaching both grammar and at the sentence-level in a functional and purposeful way, children are well positioned to discuss the different effects grammatical craft moves have on their writing (See these two links for more - [here](#) and [here](#)).

Through functional grammar teaching, children's awareness of language structure (metalinguistics) and awareness of how language is used effectively in different social contexts and for different purposes (metapragmatics) develops in sophisticated ways. These forms of awareness are strongly linked to improvements in children's writing quality.

6. Build on children's early writing development: Recognise that children's early mark-making and drawings are important developmental milestones. It helps children associate marks with meaning and develops their graphomotor skills. Understanding this developmental shift from "first-order representation" (marks directly portray objects) to "second-order representation" (marks represent spoken words) is profound (see [link](#) for more).

7. Don't delay writing instruction: Learning to write should productively run alongside learning to read. By writing, children create a model for representing speech (words, phrases, sentences) that they can then 'read' or 'tell'. This 'penny drop' moment can often be the gateway children need to truly engage with reading. It gives them a new kind of intrinsic motivation — as they read aloud words born of their own thoughts and see how others respond. In doing so, they begin to understand the purpose of reading: they have created something worth reading. And now, they read others' writing in new ways.