

Debunking edu-myths: Pupils should write about the wider-curriculum subjects in writing lessons



The Writing For Pleasure Centre

- Promoting research-informed writing teaching

“Writing about what they’ve learned in other subjects means pupils have a strong knowledge pool from which to draw.”

This idea – that writing lessons should be used as vehicles for cross-curricular learning – seems appealing. It suggests efficiency, curriculum integration, and meaningful outcomes. But it risks misunderstanding how writing and learning actually work.

Let’s examine what the research really says.

✗ Myth: Pupils write best when they write about other curriculum topics in writing lessons

This myth assumes that knowledge from other subjects is readily available in children’s long-term memory for them to draw on – that it’s rich, secure, and deeply understood. But research from cognitive science shows that writing is a demanding task that draws heavily on children’s working memory (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)). Let’s face it. Despite our best efforts, pupils rarely have deep and fluent access to subject knowledge from the wider-curriculum. As a result, they routinely struggle – not due to weak writing skills, but because they’re trying to generate content they barely remember.

The reality is that attempting to write about recently taught material can result in cognitive overload. It unnecessarily increases the mental effort children require, leaving them with less capacity to focus on the very writing skills we’re asking them to apply.

✓ What the evidence actually says:

🧠 1. Children write best when they are supported to draw on secure, long-term knowledge.

Cognitive load theory and writing research (Young & Ferguson [2022](#)) show that the most fluent and effective writing happens when pupils can retrieve content without effort. In practice, this means drawing on their own funds-of-knowledge (Young et al. [2023](#)): their lived experiences, personal interests, cultural understandings, family life and hobbies – knowledge already stored and reinforced in their long-term memory.

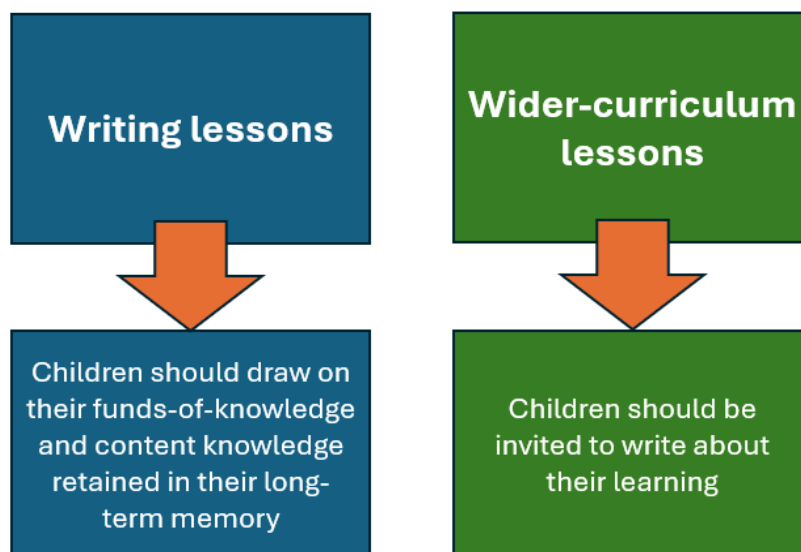
These reservoirs of knowledge are not only more accessible, but also more valued and meaningful. This means there is both a cognitive and motivational benefit to children choosing their own writing topics to write about (within the parameters of a class writing project) (Young [2024](#)). Writing from a place of familiarity allows children to focus *all their attention* on writing – sentence construction, voice, and authorial intent – rather than being distracted by wrestling with unfamiliar (and perhaps uninspiring) content.

- **Langer et al. (1984):** Highlights the strong and consistent relationship between secure content knowledge and the overall quality of student's writing.
- **McCutchen (1986):** Children produce better quality texts on topics *they* know well and are motivated by.
- **Benton et al. (1995):** Higher levels of knowledge and topic interest generally results in improved writing performance. Writing on topics of their own choosing can be particularly beneficial for less-experienced writers.
- **Kellogg (2001):** Children who know their subject well are better able to focus their attention on the quality of their writing.
- **Olinghouse et al. (2015):** Children's level of topic knowledge consistently predicts the overall quality of their story, persuasive, and informative writing.
- **Cremin et al. (2005):** Authentic writing flourishes when children are treated as authors, with space to choose what they wish to write about.
- **Graham & Perin (2007):** Choice in writing tasks is positively linked to motivation and quality of writing, particularly for struggling or reluctant writers.
- **Graham et al. (2019):** Students who possess more knowledge about their writing topic are more likely to produce better quality writing.
- **Bonafede et al. (2025):** Pupils who enjoy writing often cite choosing their own writing topics and personal relevance as key motivators.
- **Young et al. (in press):** Pupils with low motivation and confidence in writing regularly report that they wished they had more opportunities to choose what they wrote about within the parameters and structure of whole-class writing projects.



2. Writing helps children consolidate new knowledge - but timing matters.

However, this where nuance is required. There's good evidence to suggest that writing supports children's learning in lessons like history, science, and geography, particularly when it takes the form of summarising, elaboration, or self-explanation (Bangert-Drowns et al. [2004](#); Fiorella & Mayer [2015](#)). This is the foundation of disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan [2008](#)).



This kind of writing is most effective when it occurs in subject lessons and only after pupils have acquired the relevant knowledge. Asking them to write before their understanding is secure can inhibit writing quality *and* subject learning.

3. Writing lessons should focus on teaching writing.

Research highlights the importance of writing lessons focusing explicitly on teaching writing – structure, style, purpose, grammar, and audience (see our [Writing Map](#) for more details).

These skills are best taught when cognitive load is reduced when children are able to fully focus on developing their writing. This happens most reliably when pupils are writing about what they already know well. This is especially true for English language learners (Young & Ferguson [2024](#)) and children with special educational needs and disabilities (Young & Ferguson [2023](#)).

So what should we do instead?

Rather than crowbarring wider curriculum content into *writing* lessons, we should:

- Explicitly teach children idea generation strategies that model to them how they can find topics from their own secure knowledge base – their experiences, interests, and secure understanding. Of course, if a student shows a particular interest or aptitude for what they are learning in the wider-curriculum, they can decide to write on that subject!
- Use writing in wider-curriculum subjects as a tool for learning.
- Recognise that explicitly **teaching writing** and **writing for learning** both matter.

Final thought

It might sound efficient to use writing lessons to ‘double up’ on curriculum content. But the research says otherwise. If we want children to become confident, capable writers, we must teach them how to write from knowledge that is already fully embedded – not with knowledge they are already grappling with to acquire.

Key References and further reading:

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