Both, from the start: Why transcription and composition belong together

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

> *"Hi Ross and Phil. We recently had a school improvement advisor tell us to stop teaching composition in EYFS and KS1 and to just focus on teaching transcription to automaticity. He said to just teach handwriting, phonics, spelling and dictation. We're really not sure about this. Can you help?"*

The research does not support teaching transcription first and composition later. Across longitudinal studies, intervention trials and meta-analyses, children write best when they are taught to spell and handwrite explicitly ***and*** are given real reasons to compose from the very beginning of school.

This matters because a 'transcription first, fast and only' instinct is resurfacing in England. The trouble is that it treats a theory about *why* transcription matters as if it were evidence about *when* composition should be taught.

This article draws together studies that have investigated the relationship between transcription and composition. It sets out what they show, what they don't, and implications for EYFS and primary classrooms.

What the Writing Framework actually says

The DfE's *Writing Framework*'s problem is that it disowns this position in theory and then asks schools to enact it in practice.

The framework says many sensible things. It insists that 'transcription is not writing' (p. 21). It values purpose, audience, choice and composition. But its practical suggestions then pull teachers the other way.

The question is: Does children's writing develop better when composition waits for secure transcription, or when the two are taught together from the start?

Composition and transcription are intertwined from the start

Studies routinely agree on one thing: transcription matters a great deal, but it never works alone (**LINK** for more details). From when they are around three years old onwards, children's language, ideas and transcription develop together and predict writing quality together (**LINK** for more details).

Both sets of skills predict writing quality, at every age studied.

- **Preschool to Year 1.** Cabell et al. (2022) tracked children from age four. Children's composing skills and their decoding abilities both supported the quality of their compositions.
- **Reception age.** Rodríguez et al. (2024) studied Spanish-speaking kindergartners. Transcription predicted both the quality and the length of their compositions. However, their composing skills also predicted the quality of their writing. The two were strongly related to each other.
- **Year 2.** Kim & Schatschneider (2017) found that, for 6–7-year-olds, composing skills and transcription were *both* directly related to writing quality.
- **Across 104 studies.** Seoane et al.'s (2025) meta-analysis found a good level of correlation between children's oral composing skills, their transcription skills and the quality of their written compositions.

Transcription is not the whole story

Kreutz and colleagues (2026) tested German students on spelling and handwriting fluency and scored a narrative they wrote. Transcription and text quality were related but were far from interchangeable. Around one in eight students wrote a quality text despite their transcription being in the bottom 20%. A similar number showed the reverse: they had utterly sound transcriptional skills but nevertheless wrote weak texts.

What separated the groups was their composing skills. The authors conclude that transcription does not need to be fully automated before compositional skills are taught.

Across the studies shared so far, the pattern is consistent. Transcription is necessary but developing children's compositional skills is also an important part of writing from the first day too.

We know young children compose successfully long before their transcription is secure

Children do not wait for automatic transcription before they start composing. They plan, revise and write for readers long before their spelling or handwriting is conventional, and schools that support this get better writing.

- **Composing begins in preschool.** Rowe (2018) reviewed evidence that children as young as three use writing for communicative purposes. As they make and share texts, they select topics, generate ideas, organise them by genre and can even revise.
- **Preschoolers revise as they write.** Rohloff and colleagues (2024) found that preschoolers are capable of adding and deleting ideas while composing. They are already able to plan, draft and revise, in developmentally appropriate ways.
- **Six-year-olds write with their readers in mind.** Wollman-Bonilla (2001) analysed first graders' writing journals and found that they were capable of adapting their writing for their readers in identifiable ways. Audience awareness is not something children can only attend to once their transcription is automated.
- **Composing-rich classrooms produce better writers.** Gerde and colleagues (2021) report that preschool children in classrooms where teachers supported composition showed more advanced writing by the end of the year than children in classrooms where only handwriting and spelling were taught.

What the intervention evidence says

When researchers have tested the question directly, teaching transcription and composition together beats teaching either alone.

Study	Children	What was compared	Effect on transcription	Effect on composition
Harris et al. (2023)	Grades 1–2 (Y2–Y3), US, high-poverty area.	Integrated transcription and compositional teaching vs usual instruction.	Better spelling; handwriting no different than control groups.	Higher quality writing, better planning, more genre elements, longer texts.
Berninger et al. (2002)	Struggling 8–9-year-olds.	Spelling only vs composing only vs both vs a control group (learning keyboarding skills).	Spelling teaching transferred to spellings in essays.	Combined treatment was most effective overall.
Kim et al. (2021), meta-analysis	Ages 5–9 (K–Grade 3), 24 studies	Effects checked by instructional focus	Not measured.	Transcription-only teaching had no reliable effect; composition teaching had the largest effects.

'Yes, they can.' Harris et al. (2023) is the most direct test of the cognitive-overload worry. Six- to eight-year-olds from an under-resourced area were taught spelling, handwriting and oral language *at the same time* as strategies for planning and writing information texts. They were not overwhelmed. They outperformed their peers on writing quality, planning, genre elements and length, and their spelling improved more too.

Together, not apart. Berninger et al. (2002), the paper usually cited for the Simple View of Writing, tested the sequencing question with struggling 8–9-year-olds. Spelling instruction improved spelling, composing instruction improved composing, and teaching both together was the most effective and efficient option. The model the Writing Framework borrows from was built on evidence for the integration of composition and transcription.

Kim's meta-analysis. Kim and colleagues pooled together studies of 5–9-year-olds and asked which kinds of writing teaching improved children's compositions. Teaching transcription on its own did not reliably improve children's composition. Teaching that covered several aspects of writing, especially strategy instruction in planning, goal setting and text structure, produced the largest and most consistent gains. The authors are clear that transcription matters. Their conclusion is that teaching transcription alone, without systematic teaching composition too, may not have a consistent effect on children's writing.

Teaching transcription well

Arguing for integration is not arguing against explicit transcription teaching. The same research base says handwriting, letter knowledge and spelling should be taught directly, early and systematically. Children should then be given lots of opportunities to use and apply their developing skills within meaningful writing opportunities [**LINK** and **LINK** for more details].

It's important to remember that children move from mark-making that already distinguishes writing from drawing, through letter strings, to phonological spellings, then to graphotactic, orthographic and morphological knowledge (Cabell et al., 2023; Young & Ferguson, **2027**). Explicit handwriting and spelling teaching and meaningful writing opportunities accelerate this progress.

Implications for classrooms

The evidence points to a 'both, from the start' model: daily explicit transcription teaching and daily opportunities for children to compose their own texts for real readers.

- **Teach transcription explicitly, every day, from Reception.** Handwriting and spelling both need explicit lessons devoted to them [**LINK**].
- **Give children meaningful writing opportunities to apply their developing skills.** Book-making in EYFS and KS1, and class writing projects across primary, give transcription development a purpose. Children practise their handwriting and spelling skills because they want to make and share meaning with others successfully [**LINK**].
- **Talk, draw, then write.** Oral language is a direct route to writing quality. Strategies such as *make a drawing → tell your drawing → write your sentence* let children compose while their transcription continues to develop [**LINK**].
- **Teach composing strategies early.** Planning and compositional instruction produce the largest and most consistent effects in K–Grade 3 (Kim et al., 2021).
- **Teach children how to write informed spellings.** Teach children to segment and encode any word they want, then refine it towards conventional spelling through spelling instruction, feedback and proof-reading [**LINK**].
- **Be accepting of children's emergent writing.** Let children use their emergent writing as a temporary scaffold while they continue to develop their transcriptional skills [**LINK**].
- **Use dictation sparingly.** Dictation can be a useful activity within a spelling lesson. It is not a substitute for children composing their own texts, and there is no evidence that it improves children's composition or transcriptional skills [**LINK**].

References and further reading

- Berninger, V. W., & Chanquoy, L. (2012). What writing is and how it changes across early and middle childhood development: A multidisciplinary perspective. In E. L. Grigorenko, E. Mambrino & D. D. Preiss (Eds.), *Writing: A mosaic of new perspectives*. Psychology Press.
- Berninger, V. W., Vaughan, K., Abbott, R. D., Begay, K., Coleman, K. B., Curtin, G., Hawkins, J. M., & Graham, S. (2002). Teaching spelling and composition alone and together: Implications for the simple view of writing. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 94*(2), 291–304.
- Bingham, G. E., et al. (2026). Investigating the impact of preschool writing instruction on early writing development: Attention to instructional focus and strategy. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 30*(3).
- Cabell, S. Q., Gerde, H. K., Hwang, H. J., Bowles, R., Skibbe, L., Piasta, S. B., & Justice, L. M. (2022). Rate of growth of preschool-age children's oral language and decoding skills predicts beginning writing ability. *Early Education and Development, 33*(7), 1198–1221.
- Cabell, S. Q., Neuman, S. B., & Patton Terry, N. (Eds.). (2023). *Handbook on the science of early literacy*. Guilford Press.
- Farrow, J. M., Wasik, B. A., Hindman, A. H., & Farrow, M. J. (2024). Translating ideas into writing: High-impact strategies to nurture children's writing in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*.
- Gerde, H. K., Wright, T. S., & Bingham, G. E. (2021). Sharing their ideas with the world: Creating meaningful writing experiences for young children. *American Educator*, Winter 2021–22.
- Graham, S., Harris, K. R., & Adkins, M. (2018). The impact of supplemental handwriting and spelling instruction with first grade students who do not acquire transcription skills as rapidly as peers: A randomized control trial. *Reading and Writing, 31*.
- Hall, A. H., Simpson, A., Guo, Y., & Wang, S. (2015). Examining the effects of preschool writing instruction on emergent literacy skills: A systematic review of the literature. *Literacy Research and Instruction, 54*(2).
- Harris, K. R., Kim, Y.-S. G., Yim, S., Camping, A., & Graham, S. (2023). Yes, they can: Developing transcription skills and oral language in tandem with SRSD instruction on close reading of science text to write informative essays at grades 1 and 2. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*.
- Kim, Y.-S. G. (2020). Structural relations of language and cognitive skills, and topic knowledge to written composition: A test of the direct and indirect effects model of writing. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*.

- Kim, Y.-S. G. (2024). Writing fluency: Its relations with language, cognitive, and transcription skills, and writing quality using longitudinal data from kindergarten to grade 2. *Journal of Educational Psychology*.
- Kim, Y.-S. G., & Schatschneider, C. (2017). Expanding the developmental models of writing: A direct and indirect effects model of developmental writing (DIEW). *Journal of Educational Psychology, 109*(1), 35–50.
- Kim, Y.-S. G., Yang, D., Reyes, M., & Connor, C. (2021). Writing instruction improves students' writing skills differentially depending on focal instruction and children: A meta-analysis for primary grade students. *Educational Research Review, 34*.
- Kreutz, R. M., Wolf, J., Hennes, A.-K., & Schabmann, A. (2026). Good text quality despite deficient transcription skills. *Journal of Writing Research, 18*(1), 49–73.
- Medwell, J., Strand, S., & Wray, D. (2009). The links between handwriting and composing for Y6 children. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 39*(3), 329–344.
- Puranik, C., Duncan, M., & Guo, Y. (2024). Unpacking the relations of transcription and oral language to written composition in kindergarten children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.
- Rodríguez, C., Jiménez, J. E., & Balade, J. (2024). The impact of oral language and transcription skills on early writing production in kindergarteners: Productivity and quality. *Early Childhood Education Journal*.
- Rohloff, R., Ridley, J., Quinn, M. F., & Zhang, X. (2024). Young children's composing processes: Idea transformations in verbalizations from pre-writing to post-writing. *Early Childhood Education Journal*.
- Rohloff, R., Tortorelli, L., Gerde, H. K., & Bingham, G. E. (2023). Teaching early writing: Supporting early writers from preschool to elementary school. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1227–1239.
- Rowe, D. W. (2018). The unrealized promise of emergent writing: Reimagining the way forward for early writing instruction. *Language Arts, 95*(4).
- Schrodt, K., FitzPatrick, E., Lee, S., McKeown, D., McColloch, A., & Evert, K. (2024). The effects of invented spelling instruction on literacy achievement and writing motivation. Education Sciences, 14(9), 1020.
- Seoane, R. C., Wang, J., Cao, Y., & Kim, Y.-S. G. (2025). Unpacking the relation between oral language and written composition: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 96*(3), 761–798.
- Wanzek, J., Gatlin, B., Al Otaiba, S., & Kim, Y.-S. G. (2017). The impact of transcription writing interventions for first-grade students. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*.
- Wollman-Bonilla, J. (2001). Can first-grade writers demonstrate audience awareness? *Reading Research Quarterly, 36*(2), 184–201.
- Young, R., Ferguson, F. (2027) *Handbook of writing research for the early years* Brighton: The Writing For Pleasure Centre