

# Rationale

## CHANGING TIMES, CONSISTENT SUCCESS

Successful people adapt to change and new ideas, embracing those that work.

*Big Writing* started in the second half of the 1990s in schools in Kirklees Local Authority, where the writer was then the Adviser for Curriculum and Assessment. It was launched nationwide in January 2000 when she became an independent consultant and has spread nationally and internationally over the last twelve years. In that time curricular models, frameworks, initiatives, interventions and doctrine have come and gone, but *Big Writing* has quietly and consistently changed the life opportunities of children of all ages and abilities in schools where talented teachers have committed to and implemented the full approach in the lively and fun way advocated.

### If you are doing *Big Writing* well, the children will love it and will make progress.

#### The educational landscape is changing once again:

- The National Strategies have gone – and with them the detailed teaching and planning frameworks that have governed so many school curricula, and the large network of Local Authority consultants, advisors, SIPs etc who frequently ‘told schools what to do and how’.

- There is much more emphasis on schools – whether individually or in clusters, networks or federations – to come up with their own ‘school improvement’ plans, and to source resources and training to help them realise their vision.
- The new OFSTED Framework for Inspection requires teachers to demonstrate high expectations for all children, and ensure that all children are making good progress. In the past there was a tendency for teachers to focus on ‘borderline’ children who, with a bit of a push, would make it to the required level.

## Rationale

- At the time of writing, the new National Curriculum has been released in draft form for consultation. *Big Writing* is well placed to help teachers deliver this new curriculum. It meets all the expectations for talk and writing in the English Programme of Study, and is particularly effective in improving children’s grammar and punctuation skills. It is hoped (though sadly not expected) that the over prescriptive and overly ambitious requirements for grammar in the Appendix might be rejected by the public consultation process. *Big Writing* does teach all of this grammar, but it does so in context and for the purpose of *improving children’s writing* as a whole. *Big Writing* does not require children to know the technical terms for the forms of language they are using – beyond the most common terms such as comma, noun, verb, adjective, adverb, phrase and clause – because knowledge of such terms does not of itself turn children in to better writers.

Whatever the political landscape, the need to improve writing standards is a constant issue for many schools and boys’ writing in particular is a cause for concern. *Big Writing* can make a difference!

This new publication aims to re-present *Big Writing* to both new and existing users, to showcase the many facets of the approach, and its breadth and flexibility as a means of raising standards in writing. It also aims to explore the wide range of skills necessary to be a great writer (the Writer’s Toolkit) and to include new ideas, suggestions, guidance and case studies.

The writer has always stated that a school can introduce and implement *Big Writing* at very little cost – using just this book, strong leadership and committed, enthusiastic teachers.



Those schools interested in further support for implementing *Big Writing* may wish to explore:

- The companion publications: *Writing Voice and Basic Skills: The class teacher’s guide to Big Writing* (OUP), *Talk the Big Talk* (OUP), *ACE: Assessment Criteria Expanded* (Andrell Education Ltd).
- The comprehensive professional development courses provided by Andrell Education Ltd – see [www.andrelleducation.co.uk](http://www.andrelleducation.co.uk)
- The exciting *Project X* resources developed by Oxford University Press – see [www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/projectx](http://www.oxfordprimary.co.uk/projectx)

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# Introduction

## PART 1: AN OVERVIEW OF WRITING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

### 1.1 Post-National Strategies practice

The National Literacy Strategy (NLS) had great strengths, but it also had significant weaknesses that were a barrier to many schools achieving the expected standards, particularly in writing.

The greatest strength of the NLS was the provision of clear formulae for the teaching of features of different text types and, as schools move further away from the rigidity of the NLS Framework and Unit Plans approach, it is crucial that they do not lose the current high standard of teaching of these key 'WHAT' features of writing (see page 23).

The greatest weakness of the NLS was that, in changing the subject descriptor from 'English' to 'Literacy', it focused too heavily on reading and writing and caused the demise, in many schools, of the high quality teaching of speaking, listening, drama, role

play and reading for pleasure. It also placed too great an emphasis on the links between reading and writing, and not nearly enough on the crucial role of talk in the writing process. The failure of the NLS to advocate the teaching of the full range of skills needed to be a successful writer has led to an inevitable stalling of overall progress in writing.

In this publication, the subject will once more be referred to as **English**, which incorporates:

- 1 Phonics – for reading and spelling
- 2 Irregular sight vocabulary – for reading and spelling
- 3 High frequency words
- 4 Grammar and punctuation
- 5 Reading comprehension
- 6 Appreciation of literature and poetry
- 7 Drama and role play
- 8 Speaking and listening
- 9 Debate and discussion
- 10 Focused teaching of text types/genre
- 11 Focused teaching of Writing Voice – through VCOP

“Many schools have evidenced that, with high quality teaching of the above 11 aspects of English, 90% or more of all mainstream children can achieve the expected standards by the age of 11.”

## SATS RESULTS FOR WRITING AT KEY STAGE 2

| Year |            | Writing Level 4+ | Writing Level 5+ |
|------|------------|------------------|------------------|
| 2011 | All pupils | 75%              | 20%              |
|      | Girls      | 81%              | 25%              |
|      | Boys       | 68%              | 15%              |
| 2010 | All pupils | 71%              | 21%              |
|      | Girls      | 79%              | 26%              |
|      | Boys       | 64%              | 15%              |
| 2009 | All pupils | 67%              | 19%              |
|      | Girls      | 75%              | 24%              |
|      | Boys       | 60%              | 15%              |
| 2008 | All pupils | 68%              | 20%              |
|      | Girls      | 75%              | 25%              |
|      | Boys       | 61%              | 15%              |

### 1.2 National standards in writing

Standards in writing rose markedly with the introduction of national tests for eleven year olds, but in recent years there has been little change in national standards for writing, which rose from 69% of pupils achieving the required Level 4 in 2004, to 71% in 2010. In 2011, standards allegedly rose to 75%, but the marking of the writing test was heavily criticised that year and few professionals have any confidence in the data. It is for this reason that the government announced the end of formal testing in writing, with associated external marking, from 2012.

The testing system for writing was seriously flawed due to:

- Occasionally unsuitable and/or simply dull stimuli that showed a lack of awareness of some children's real life experiences – for example, the 'Day at the Seaside' task or the 'Standing at the bus stop' task

- Occasional self-invalidation of the 'purpose, organisation and awareness of audience' criteria through, for example, the provision of a storyboard ('The Queue', 2003) or provision of the opening lines of the dialogue ('Can I Stay Up and Watch TV?', 2005)
- Ambiguous or vague marking criteria in the handbooks
- Provision of additional criteria to the markers that were not shared with teachers
- Appointment of some markers whose knowledge of levels in writing was not strong enough.

The above should have sparked an enquiry into how the testing of writing could best be improved, rather than abandoning the practice because those managing it were not well enough informed.

### 1.3 Accurate assessment of writing

The current popular practice of forming judgements about a pupil's writing level by using a small collection of writing produced in 'real' lessons is severely flawed as many teachers are using the evidence of one skill in one piece and another skill in another piece. A child writing at Level 4 will consistently use all their skills whatever the stimulus or text type, as appropriate, and this must be taken into account.

The risk is that the teacher teaches a skill, the children use it and 'evidence' it, then many forget it. The next week they learn a new skill and evidence that, then many forget it again. Thus these higher level skills are only exhibited in one or two pieces and are not genuinely embedded. If Teacher Assessment is to be based on five or six samples of work, they still need to be produced without support and those high level skills should be evident across the range. In addition, the pieces need to be close to a side of A4 or more in length, as children often use higher levels of skill for the opening of a piece and then show a gradual decline. The ability to sustain levels of writing is an important feature of higher level pieces.

If a rigorous and accurate assessment model had been provided nationally, and all teachers been given thorough training in its use, plus it had been advised that children should still produce a longer piece of writing without any input or support; such a model would be acceptable for national data collection. Instead schools have been provided with assessment criteria that are

inherently flawed and a system that means final judgements will be based on work that has often been supported through strong teacher input, stimulus material and models being available and examples of higher level vocabulary provided. Levels awarded in this scenario will be above the level the children would achieve if unsupported, and are therefore not representative of truly 'embedded' skills (see Chapter 2).

The proposed new practice of moderated teacher assessment will only be as good as an individual school's ability to assess writing, unless it is rigorously moderated by external practitioners with thorough knowledge of the assessment of writing.

## EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

### Assessment of a child's current level of achievement should:

- Provide a summative judgement of the precise level the child is currently performing at.
- Enable a reasoned but challenging prediction of where the child's level of performance should be by the end of the academic year.
- Inform the teacher what needs to be taught over forthcoming weeks and terms in order to achieve the prediction.
- Inform the teacher what immediate learning needs to take place to move forward.
- Inform the teacher what areas or aspects of the subject the child is failing to thrive in and how this might be remediated.
- Enable the teacher to communicate with the child as to what he or she needs to do immediately in order to make good progress.

### Criteria must, therefore, be:

- Accurate in terms of the skills required to become a high level writer.
- Accurate in terms of providing an accurate match to the standards expected in the National Curriculum and national data systems.
- Detailed to allow precise and accurate assessment, regardless of who uses them.
- Detailed to allow precise and accurate prediction of future progress.
- Detailed to allow precise and accurate communication with the child as to their current and future needs.
- Detailed and precise in order to enable the teacher to plan or adjust the curriculum to best provide for children's learning needs.

The *Big Writing* approach to effective assessment is outlined in more detail in Chapter 4.

## PART 2: AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIG WRITING APPROACH

### 2.1 The Writer's Toolkit

To be a successful, high level writer an individual usually needs to be able to:

- 1 Correctly interpret the type of text required and use its features accurately
- 2 Correctly interpret the purpose of the piece and respond appropriately (stimulus)
- 3 Spell
- 4 Use Standard English (correct grammar)
- 5 Write legibly and quickly, preferably in a flowing and joined style
- 6 Use punctuation accurately
- 7 Structure language correctly and often in ways that are different from the language of daily speech.

The National Strategies acknowledged the range of skills needed, but did not directly address methodology for achieving high standards in all seven strands, only in the first one and, to some degree, the second. They left it to teachers to work out how to teach the remainder and teachers have continued to attempt to do this the same way they were taught or have failed to do it at all. It is for this reason that, despite the huge injections of funding into the National Strategies between 1998 and 2010, **30% of children still do not reach the expected standards in writing.**

In *Big Writing*, the full range of skills is called the **Writer's Toolkit** and can be summarised as 'The Two WHATS and the Two HOWS':

WHAT 1: The text type or genre to be written

WHAT 2: The stimulus or purpose for writing

HOW 1: GHaSP (Grammar, Handwriting, Spelling and Punctuation)

HOW 2: 'Writing Voice' or high level language structures

As mentioned, the two WHATs have been well developed under the NLS and most schools are now confident in teaching them.

*Big Writing* provides schools with:

- a framework for teaching the two HOWs through lively, fun, focused activities
- opportunities for pupils to practise and apply the full range of writing skills through production of regular extended writing pieces
- formal and informal opportunities for teachers to assess the full range of writing skills demonstrated by pupils
- clear next steps for teachers to share with pupils.

### 2.2 Basic Skills

Re-teaching of the four Basic Skills, known as GHaSP (grammar, handwriting, spelling and punctuation) in *Big Writing* terminology, is crucial in many schools at the beginning of Year 3 and should then be an on-going feature of teaching across Key Stage 2.

The current draft new National Curriculum for English places heavy emphasis on the teaching of formal grammar in the traditional grammar school style with a grammar, spelling and punctuation test being introduced for eleven-year-olds from 2013. It is sincerely hoped that this will be rejected. The teaching of formal grammar was ever delayed until secondary education and it is not necessary for children to understand formal grammar in order to be able to use Standard English. Correct grammar structures should be taught through TALK in the primary years. Children only make grammar errors because that is the way they talk. Change the talk, you change the grammar.

Likewise, it is not necessary for young children to know the technical names for word classes in order to be high level writers. Many successful, professional people, who write at the very highest levels, have never known or needed to know the technical names of word classes or parts of speech. This knowledge is only relevant for higher level examinations in English Language and for the world of academia in English.

The four Basic Skills are considered in greater detail in Chapter 2.

### 2.3 Writing Voice

Historically 'writing voice' – that is, the more formal structures of written language – has been seen as a skill which develops primarily through literary appreciation, i.e. reading. Teachers have believed that through reading quality writing, and then discussing what made it good, children would absorb the features of high level writing voice *and* be able to use this high level writing voice in their own work. Teachers believed this because that is generally how they developed their 'voice'; but teachers are professionals who have succeeded academically, earning GCSEs and 'A' levels, university degrees and teaching qualifications in most cases. More than half the population of this country do not enjoy that success in education because they do not absorb new language the way most professionals do. Many children need to use new language repeatedly (this is called patterning) in order to embed it in long term memory and to know how to use it.

*Big Writing* is the teaching of 'writing voice' – also known in *Big Writing* as VCOP – in a fun and structured way that enables all children to achieve well as writers, whilst 'sorting out' the Basic Skills. Schools should not do *Big Writing* INSTEAD of what they are already doing; they should do it as well, providing what they are already doing is working for the children.

“CHILDREN ONLY MAKE GRAMMAR ERRORS BECAUSE THAT IS THE WAY THEY TALK. CHANGE THE TALK, YOU CHANGE THE GRAMMAR.”

### 2.4 What *Big Writing* is ... and what it is not!

Done well, *Big Writing* is:

- a highly enjoyable and motivating experience for teachers and children
- a framework for teaching the two HOWs of writing – basic skills and writing voice
- a process that has an immediate impact (within three to eight weeks usually) on the quality of children's writing
- formulaic in the early stages for some children, as are the initial teaching of all basic skills – however, it soon becomes flexible and creative as confidence and repertoires grow.

Again, done well, *Big Writing* is:

- NOT tedious, onerous or overly time-consuming
- NOT formulaic – to the extent of suggesting or dictating how many of each feature should be seen in writing, e.g. the number of adjectives
- NOT teaching and/or assessing by numbers
- NOT just about 'wow words'.

NB *Big Writing* does not explicitly cover the teaching of the features of text types or genre, nor is it the teaching of children to respond to stimulus. These skills are generally taught at other points in the English and/or wider curriculum timetable. However, the *Big Writing* approach and the weekly 'Big Write' should be embedded into your whole school planning.

# The Big Writing Toolkit



## 2.5 The Big Writing method

*Big Writing* provides a whole-school framework for assessment, target setting and teaching that can be flexed and adapted to suit the needs of an individual school. It provides a range of teaching strategies that can be used alongside other approaches including, for example, systematic synthetic phonics teaching, talk for writing, modelled or guided writing, writing across the curriculum.

*Big Writing* consists of the following strategies which will be explained in more detail in Chapters 1-3. These strategies can be applied from Year 1 or Year 2 onwards. Strategies for the Early Years Foundation Stage are outlined in Chapter 5 and discussed in more detail in *Talk the Big Talk* by Ros Wilson (Oxford University Press).

- **Daily basic skills:** 10 minutes every day covering phonics, spelling, handwriting (and times tables).
- **Stocking fillers:** short, 5 minute VCOP sessions to recycle skills from the previous week.
- **'Bells work:** quick-fire 'make me up ...' activities to embed new language and skills whilst waiting for playtime, lunch, etc.
- **The Big Write:** extended VCOP session followed by an extended, silent writing session (*see below*).

The weekly, or fortnightly, **Big Write** session – usually on a Thursday or Friday – has become a popular feature of many schools. Ideally it should be just one part of the more widely embedded approach outlined in this book.

The **Big Write** session consists of:

- A 'talk' homework the night before – for children to discuss and prepare (mentally) what they are going to write about.
- One hour per week in Year 1, split into two 30 minute sessions before and after morning playtime. It may be introduced as 10 minutes and 10 minutes initially and built up to the full 30/30.
- One and a half hours in Years 2 to 6, split into two 45 minute sessions before and after morning playtime. In Year 2, it may start with two 30 minute sessions and gradually increase to 45/45.
- First 35 minutes = fast, fun work on correct use of vocabulary, connectives, sentence openers and punctuation (VCOP).
- Followed by 10 minutes of 'planning time' – that is, oral or diagrammatical rehearsal of writing.
- After play the children write individually, in silence, with an atmosphere that supports both concentration and creativity (dimmed lights, low volume Mozart, regular brain breaks through the use of time prompts).
- Those unable to write for the full time would have a choice of at least two other silent activities they can change to without disturbing the class.
- There is no set length for children to write to in these sessions, although from Year 2 onwards most children should be able to complete one side of A4, rising to one and a half or possibly even two sides

## 2.6 Assessment and the Criterion Scale

The **Criterion Scale** is at the heart of the *Big Writing* approach. It has been generated from a range of national sources and standardised using over 20,000 pieces of children's writing.

It is a generic scale and can be used to assess any text type. When used effectively it gives an accurate correspondence to national expectations.

The *Big Writing* approach, explained in more detail in Chapters 1-4, should be seen as a continuous and embedded process of:

- effective use of the **Criterion Scale** to set clear targets for individual pupils
- proactive teaching of **Writing Voice** through the **Four Generic Targets (VCOP)**
- regular teaching and practise of the basic skills: **Grammar, Handwriting, Spelling, Punctuation (GHaSP)**
- regular opportunities for children to do extended writing – in all subjects
- regular and precise response to pupils' achievement through feedback
- termly **targeted assessment tasks** to inform the long term strategy.

The current proposals for the new National Curriculum for English claim that there will no longer be Levels or Level Descriptions and that progress will be measured against the statements within the Programmes of Study. Within schools, however, this will render Senior Leaders unable to track pupils' progress through the curriculum and to speedily identify pupils who are failing to thrive. Levels have become a common

### Every child's writing journey is different

*Big Writing* is sometimes disparagingly referred to as 'writing by numbers'. This is simply not the case! The Criterion Scale and the VCOP skills are not intended to provide a rigid pathway for all children to follow. The Criterion Scale provides an accurate formative assessment of what individual children know, what they need to learn next and how their writing can be improved – and this will differ from child to child. The VCOP skills should be taught in lively, fun, interactive ways that will engage children, whilst the sharing of the 'secret garden' of assessment gives them a clear purpose for learning.

language that has a clarity and sharpness amongst knowledgeable professionals. Without Levels, we must return to saying a child is 'doing well' or that a piece of learning is 'very good', but this can mean widely different achievement for different children and when used by different teachers.

The writer firmly believes that, within schools, Levels will remain a useful measure of progress and a valuable tool for tracking and recording progress.