



Introduction

As ever, in education, we are going through a period of radical curriculum change plus changes in the testing regime. The onus will no longer be on Year 2 and Year 6 teachers to carry the key responsibility for standards in a school. Every year will become more accountable with standards measured every two years and tracked thoroughly in every class. More significantly, getting children to a benchmark standard or level of achievement will no longer be sufficient; schools must be able to demonstrate the *progress* made by their pupils, from whatever their starting point. OFSTED will be looking for evidence of every child making progress in every year group and teachers will be expected to know where each child is and what is being done to help their progression. Such tracking and identification of next steps is at the heart of *Big Writing*.

Increasingly, the authorities and those in government are recognising the importance of talk in education and the serious impact of language deprivation on standards in tests and examinations. In *Big Writing* we have been saying 'If the child can't say it, the child can't write it,' since 1997. That is why the whole philosophy of *Big Writing* is rooted in teaching children to write better through talk.

This new publication has been written as a practical guide on how to plan and teach *Big Writing* in the classroom. It is aimed at the class teacher or English leader who has identified a need to raise writing standards. It is suggested that teachers implement *Big Writing*, as it is described here, for at least a half term before adapting the model to suit their own teaching style. The basic structure should, however, remain true to the approach.



This handbook includes six lesson plans to enable the teacher to start with confidence, although use of the plans and associated resources is optional.

In order to teach *Big Writing* effectively, the teacher will need:

- full understanding of the process – as outlined in this book
- firm belief in its power to work
- a sense of humour
- a positive approach
- high expectations for all children's achievement
- masses of energy.

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01: An Overview of Big Writing

WHAT IS BIG WRITING?

Big Writing is an approach to teaching writing and raising writing standards that focuses on:

- The importance of TALK and oral rehearsal
- Accurate basic skills – spelling, punctuation, grammar, handwriting
- Regular and meaningful assessment and target setting
- High expectations for all pupils
- Giving writing a purpose and making it fun!

The Writer's Toolkit

In *Big Writing*, the full range of writing 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: Basic Skills: GHaSP

HOW 2: 'Writing Voice'

Most schools are now confident in teaching the two WHATs. *Big Writing* provides schools with a framework for teaching the two HOWs through lively, fun, focused activities and a weekly opportunity for children to apply their skills in an extended writing task.

The four **basic skills** that children need to draw on with increasing automaticity and fluency in their writing are:

- **Grammar** – the use of correct grammar/standard English at all times.
- **Handwriting** – accurate, fast and flowing, preferably using a cursive style. At a minimum, neat and legible.

- **Spelling** – accurate in all sight words and the majority of ambitious vocabulary, and demonstrating the full range of phonic strategies.
- **Punctuation** – accurate use of all sentence punctuation and creative but accurate use of a wide range of punctuation for 'voice' and effect.

The writer's voice defines both the language the writer uses and the style with which he or she structures sentences. In *Big Writing* it is taught through VCOP, which is:

- The range of **vocabulary** the child has and can use, including ambitious vocabulary (also known as Wow Words).
- The use of a wide range of **connectives**, including higher level connectives.
- The range of ways the child has for **opening** sentences, including the use of the three Power Openers (connectives, 'ly' words and 'ing' words).
- The range of **punctuation** the child uses, including punctuation for effect or Power Punctuation (? ! ...)

Big Writing therefore consists of:

- **Daily basic skills:** 10 minutes every day covering phonics, spelling and handwriting
- **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.

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.
- 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).

Assessment and the Criterion Scale

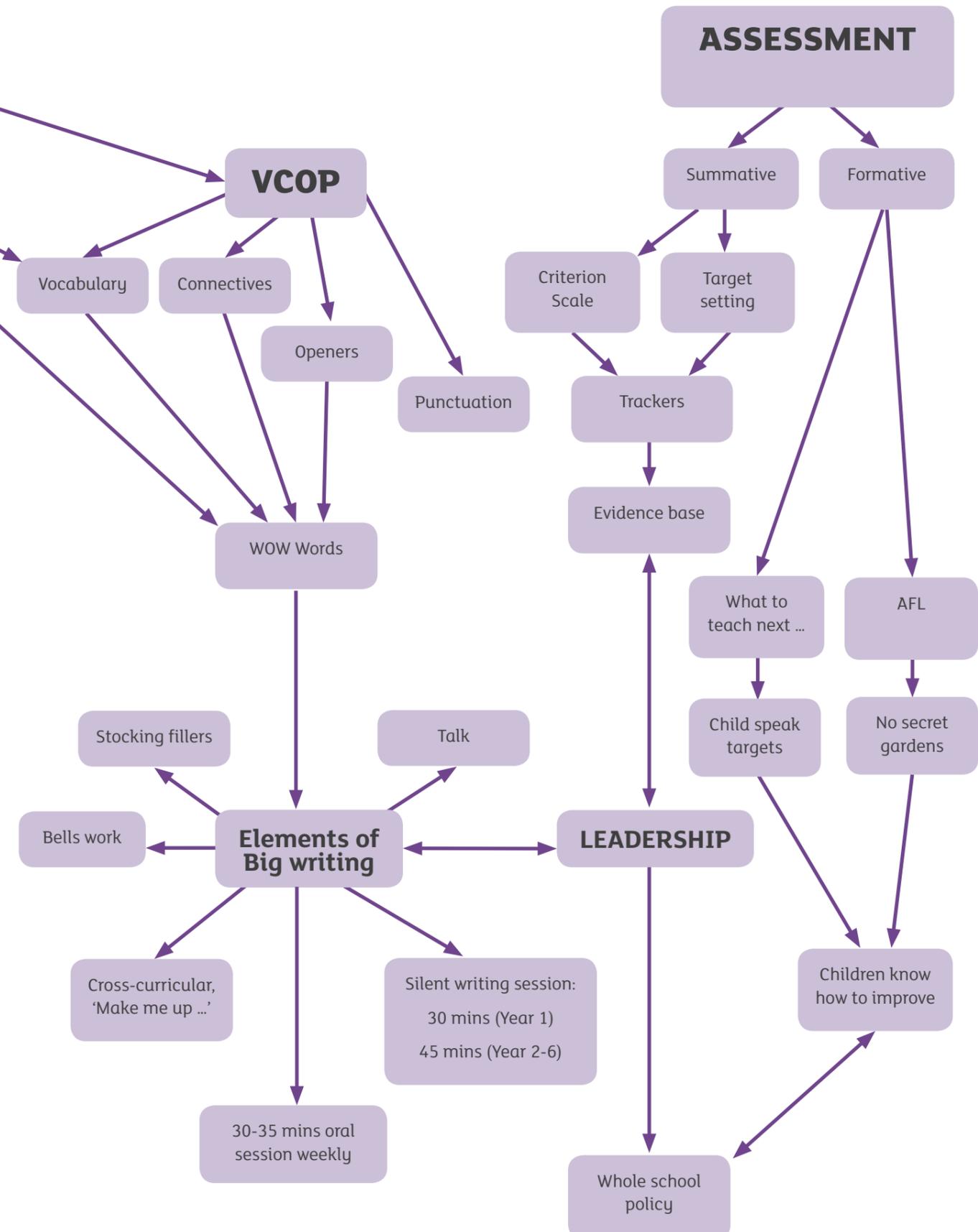
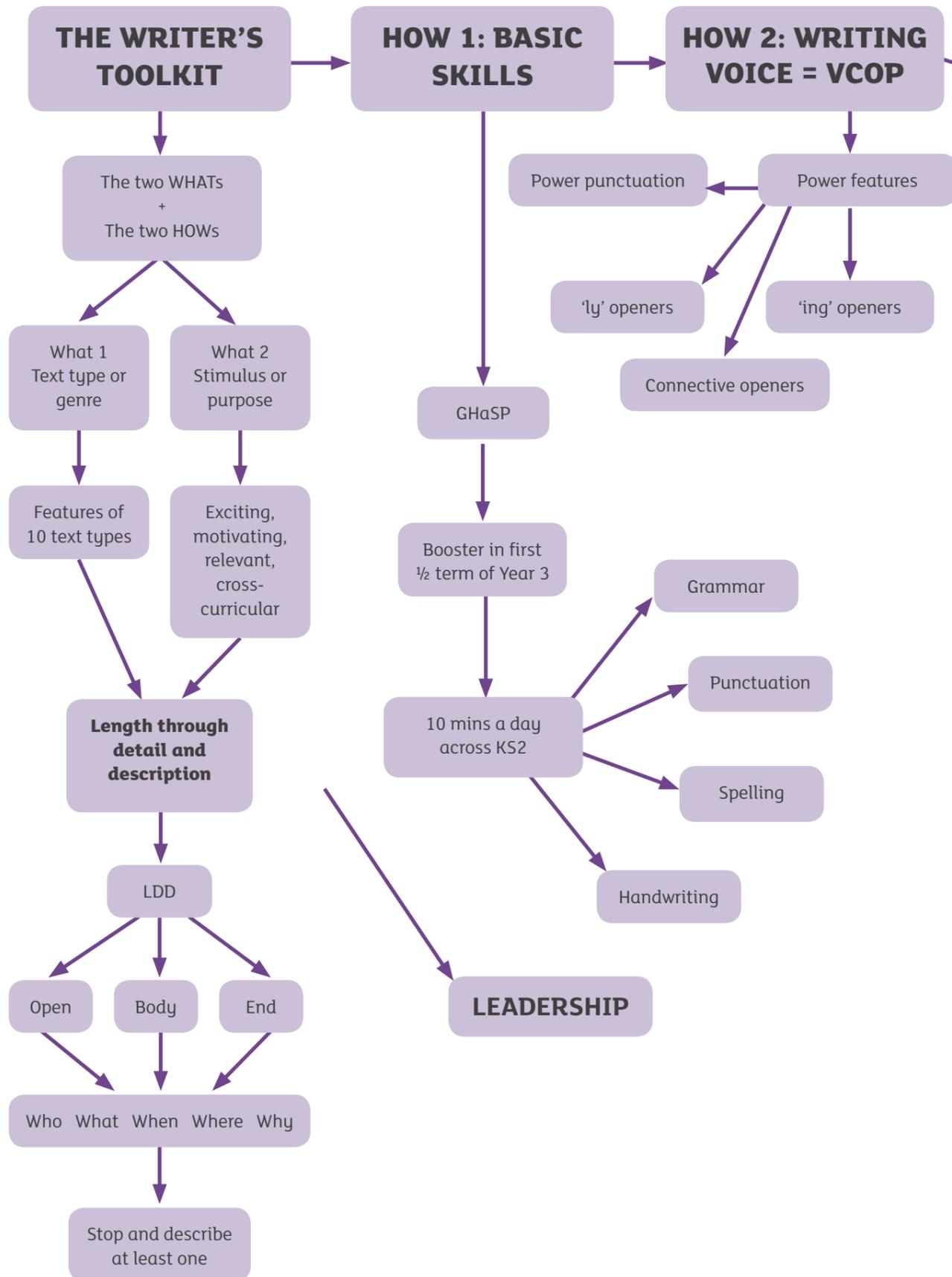
The **Criterion Scale** – provided in full in Appendix 1 – is at the heart of the *Big Writing* approach. It is a generic scale to support the accurate assessment of writing in line with national expectations and provides detailed identification of the specific skills children need to improve to make progress.

Big Writing is all about involving pupils in their learning by sharing the 'secret garden' of assessment with them. By explaining exactly what we're doing in terms of assessment and setting clear, manageable targets, we can excite and empower pupils to make progress. This approach is particularly helpful in motivating children who are already disaffected by writing – especially boys.

As well as regular assessment for learning, the *Big Writing* approach recommends monitoring children's progress based on three formal summative assessments each school year from Years 1 to 6. During these **Targeted Assessment Tasks** (or TATs), pupils are required to produce a piece of unsupported writing within a timed period. Each piece should be assessed using the Criterion Scale and awarded a level and sub-level. It is still useful to sub-divide each level into sub-levels, which we label C (low), B (average), or A (high), to enable more specific tracking, recognition of progress within a level and more specific target setting. The child should then be set a long-term target for achievement over a specific period (e.g. by the time of the next TAT) and three short-term 'small steps' targets to support immediate progress towards the long-term target.

Further details on the *Big Writing* approach to assessment can be found in *Raising Writing Standards: A powerful and effective whole-school approach* by Ros Wilson (OUP, 2012).

The Big Writing Toolkit



The Big Writing Action Plan

The Action Plan below is designed to help you get started with *Big Writing*. Ideas for implementing the Action Plan, including practical activities and lesson plans, are provided in Part 2 of this book.

1 BASELINE ASSESS	Use the Criterion Scale (see <i>Appendix 1</i>) to assess a piece of unsupported writing from every child before the first Big Write Session.
2 BUY or SOURCE MATERIALS	Source the materials you will need for the Big Write session and for the Class Evidence Base: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Candle or lava lamp • Classical music • Special pens and paper • Food treats as rewards • Class folder for assessments
3 PREPARE EVIDENCE BASE	Create a folder in which to store the assessment record for the whole class and the three annual Targeted Assessment Tasks for each pupil.
4 IDENTIFY TIMETABLE TIME	The Big Write session requires two slots of 30 minutes each in Year 1, rising to 45 minutes each in Year 2 and beyond. Plan this double session straddling morning playtime, preferably on a Thursday or Friday.
5. PLAN TEXT TYPE AND STIMULUS	The text type and stimulus for the Big Write session should be linked to on-going work in English and/or linked to the wider curriculum. Make sure it is interesting / stimulating.
6 PLAN LIVELY VCOP SESSION	Plan a series of fun activities (called 'games') that move constantly back and forth across all aspects and levels of VCOP.
7 BRIEFLY REVIEW TEXT TYPE THE AFTERNOON BEFORE	Remind children when they learned the text to be written and spend up to 10 minutes on a quick review (visual and oral) of its features.
8 GIVE TALK HOMEWORK (STIMULUS) THE DAY BEFORE	Prepare the slips to send home, informing families what the topic for talk is. Go over the stimulus for 5 minutes.
9 TEACH ORAL SESSION – LIVELY AND FUN!	Open the first session with 35 minutes (25 in Year 1) of lively, fun VCOP activities and games. Spend 5-10 minutes on quiet planning.
10 PREPARE THE ENVIRONMENT AT PLAYTIME	Prepare the classroom environment for the Big Write session. Dim the lights and light a candle or lava lamp. Play classical music softly.
11 MANAGE THE SILENT WRITING SESSION	Meet the children at the door and ensure they come in in silence, sit in silence and start to write. Then sit and model self as a writer, speaking only for the time prompts.
12 MARK THE WRITING CAREFULLY	Praise at least three positives from stimulus and voice. Give two targets for progress in the next week.
13 RETURN THE WRITING PROMPTLY	Return writing as soon as possible – the following day, or the following Monday. Give up to 15 minutes for children to read the comments together, in pairs, and discuss the targets.
14 PLAN FURTHER TEACHING	Use progress observed during the oral session and while marking to identify areas for teaching during the stocking filler sessions and the next oral session.

1 Baseline assess

- Assess a piece of unsupported writing using the Criterion Scale (see *Appendix 1*).
- Create a spread sheet or table with every child's name down the side and several columns.
- Put the child's date of birth in the second column.
- Put the child's first language, if not English, in the third column.
- Put the date of the baseline assessment at the top of the fourth column and enter the sub levels.
- Set a target for where the child should be by the end of the academic year in the fifth column.
- Put the date for the next assessment in the top of the next column.

2 Buy or source materials

- Buy special pens for *Big Writing*, if you can afford them.
- Decide where children will do the writing – ring binder, folder, special book?
- Organise a CD player and classical music (preferably Mozart).
- Buy a real or electric large candle or a lava lamp.
- Buy some treats to use as rewards during the Big Write session – grapes, tangerines, sweets or chocolates.
- Have a large, easy-to-read clock hung above the whiteboard.
- Source materials for the class Evidence Base – a regular ring binder, plastic pockets, sticky labels.

3 Prepare evidence base

- Put every child's name, date of birth and first language, if other than English, onto a label and attach one to each plastic pocket.
- Put the spread sheet created for the Baseline Assessment into the first plastic pocket in the ring binder.
- Put the first baseline assessed piece of writing into each child's plastic pocket, turned backwards. Each subsequent piece is then inserted facing the right way.

4 Identify timetable time

- Identify the day of the week that is to contain the Big Write session, preferably on a Thursday or Friday.
- Adjust the timetable for that day to allow the Big Write session of 1½ hours (1 hour in Year 1) to be split exactly in half by morning playtime, creating two 45 minute sessions (two 30 minute sessions in Year 1).

For advice on using Big Writing in the Foundation Stage see page 40, or refer to Talk the Big Talk: Building the foundations for Big Writing and beyond, by Ros Wilson, (OUP, 2012).

5 Plan the text type and stimulus

- Plan the text type to be written in the second part of the Big Write session.
- Ensure the text type is one that the children have already experienced in the school's teaching sequence for text types.
- Select an exciting stimulus for the children to write to.
- Whenever possible, ensure the text type, stimulus and purpose for writing springs out of learning in the wider curriculum.