

Unit 6 Writing

■ What is writing?

Writing is one of the four language **skills**: reading, writing, listening and speaking. Writing and speaking are **productive skills**. That means they involve producing language rather than receiving it. Very simply, we can say that writing involves communicating a message (something to say) by making signs on a page. To write we need a message and someone to communicate it to. We also need to be able to form letters and words, and to join these together to make words, sentences or a series of sentences that link together to communicate that message.

■ Key concepts

What have you written in your language in the past week?

Maybe you have not written anything in the past week! It is true that we do not write very much these days. But possibly you have written a shopping list, a postcard, a birthday card, some emails, your diary, maybe a story. If you are studying, perhaps you have written an essay. All of these are examples of written text types. You can see from this list that text types involve different kinds of writing, e.g. single words only, short sentences or long sentences; use (or not) of note form, addresses or paragraphs, special layouts; different ways of ordering information. When we learn to write, we need to learn how to deal with these different features.

All written text types have two things in common. Firstly, they are written to communicate a particular message, and secondly, they are written to communicate to somebody. Our message and who we are writing to influence what we write and how we write. For example, if you write a note to yourself to remind yourself to do something, you may write in terrible handwriting, and use note form or single words that other people would not understand. If you write a note for your friend to remind him/her of something, your note will probably be clearer and a bit more polite.

Writing involves several **subskills**. Some of these are related to **accuracy**, i.e. using the correct forms of language. Writing accurately involves spelling correctly, forming letters correctly, writing legibly, punctuating correctly, using correct layouts, choosing the right vocabulary, using grammar correctly, joining sentences correctly and using paragraphs correctly.

But writing isn't just about accuracy. It is also about having a message and communicating it successfully to other people. To do this, we need to have enough ideas, organise them well and express them in an appropriate style.

The table below is from a writing syllabus for primary-school children. The column on the left focuses on accuracy, and the column on the right focuses on communication.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Showing an understanding that letters can be combined to form words, and producing letter shapes, including capital letters, correctly• Using initial capital letters and full stops to indicate sentences• Employing a range of connectives to express sequence (e.g. <i>next, then</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Completing simple poems and rhymes with some language support and based on models• Expressing your own experience by supplying labels for your own drawings• Making simple greetings cards and invitations based on models• Responding to greetings and invitations in short notes based on models
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(adapted from *Syllabuses for Primary Schools, English Language, Primary 1–6*, the Education Department, Hong Kong 1997)

Writing also often involves going through a number of stages. When we write outside the classroom we often go through these stages:

- **brainstorming** (thinking of everything we can about the topic)
- making notes
- planning (organising our ideas)
- writing a **draft** (a piece of writing that is not yet finished, and may be changed)
- **editing** (correcting and improving the text)
- producing another draft
- **proof-reading** (checking for mistakes in accuracy) or editing again.

These are the stages of the writing process.

■ Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- The subskills of writing that we teach will vary a lot, depending on the age and needs of our learners. At primary level we may spend a lot of time teaching learners how to form letters and words and write short texts of a few words or sentences, often by copying models. At secondary level we may need to focus more on the skills required to write longer texts such as letters, emails or compositions.
- When we teach writing we need to focus on both accuracy and on building up and communicating a message.
- Sometimes in the classroom learners write by, for example, completing gaps in sentences with the correct word, taking notes for listening comprehension, writing one-word answers to reading comprehension questions. These activities are very useful for teaching grammar, and checking listening and reading, but they do not teach the skills of writing. To teach the writing subskills we need to focus on accuracy in writing, on communicating a message and on the writing process.
- By encouraging learners to use the writing process in the classroom we help them to be creative and to develop their message, i.e. what they want to say.

See Unit 16 for teaching writing, Unit 20 for planning a lesson and Units 28 and 31 for ways of correcting learners' writing.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Here are some suggestions for writing activities. Do they focus on:

A accuracy or B communicating ideas?

- 1 Reading charts and then writing sentences about them, e.g.:

	Tom	Linda
Swimming	✓	X
Playing Playstation	X	✓
Reading	✓	X
Watching TV	X	✓
Dancing	✓	X

✓ = likes

X = doesn't like

Example sentence: Tom likes swimming but Linda doesn't.

- 2 Writing letters, e.g. a letter to a penfriend telling them about yourself.
- 3 Labelling pictures or objects, e.g. clothes, animals.
- 4 Completing a story, e.g. the teacher gives the students the beginning, middle or end of a story and asks them to complete the missing part(s).
- 5 Copying words from a reading book into an exercise book.
- 6 Writing emails to other students in the school.

REFLECTION

- 1 How did you learn to write English? Was it the best way?
- 2 What for you are the easiest and most difficult things about writing in English? And for your learners?
- 3 Which writing subskills do your learners need to focus on most?