

8 How to teach writing

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Why teach writing?

The reasons for teaching writing to students of English as a foreign language include reinforcement, language development, learning style and, most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right. We will look at each of these in turn.

Reinforcement: some students acquire languages in a purely oral/aural way, but most of us benefit greatly from seeing the language written down. The visual demonstration of language construction is invaluable for both our understanding of how it all fits together and as an aid to committing the new language to memory. Students often find it useful to write sentences using new language shortly after they have studied it.

Language development: we can't be sure, but it seems that the actual process of writing (rather like the process of speaking) helps us to learn as we go along. The mental activity we have to go through in order to construct proper written texts is all part of the ongoing learning experience.

Learning style: some students are fantastically quick at picking up language just by looking and listening. For the rest of us, it may take a little longer. For many learners, the time to think things through, to produce language in a slower way, is invaluable. Writing is appropriate for such learners. It can also be a quiet reflective activity instead of the rush and bother of interpersonal face-to-face communication.

Writing as a skill: by far the most important reason for teaching writing, of course, is that it is a basic language skill, just as important as speaking, listening and reading. Students need to know how to write letters, how to put written reports together, how to reply to advertisements – and increasingly, how to write using electronic

media. They need to know some of writing's special conventions (punctuation, paragraph construction etc.) just as they need to know how to pronounce spoken English appropriately. Part of our job is to give them that skill.

What kind of writing should students do?

Like many other aspects of English language teaching, the type of writing we get students to do will depend on their age, interests and level. We can get beginners to write simple poems, but we probably won't give them an extended report on town planning to do. When we set tasks for elementary students, we will make sure that the students have – or can get – enough language to complete the task. Such students can write a simple story but they are not equipped to create a complex narrative. It's all a question of what language the students have at their command and what can be achieved with this language. As we shall see with the four examples in this chapter, the models we give students to imitate will be chosen according to their abilities.

In general, however, we will try to get students writing in a number of common everyday styles. These will include writing postcards, letters of various kinds, filling in forms such as job applications, writing narrative compositions, reports, newspaper and magazine articles etc. We may also want to have students write such text types as dialogues, playscripts, advertisements, or poems – if we think these will motivate them.

Another factor which can determine our choice of writing task is the students' interests. If everyone in the class works in a bank, we might choose to get them writing bank reports. If they are all travel agents, you can imagine getting them to write alluring advertisements for special deals. But, of course, this should not preclude using other types of creative writing with such groups.

When we have a much more mixed group – students, secretaries, doctors, teachers and police officers, for example – their interests won't be so easy to pin down. At this point we will choose writing tasks which we think are generally useful but which, more importantly, they are likely to enjoy doing. Students may never have a need to write a scene from a soap opera, for example, but they might enjoy having a go, so it is worth doing.

There is no limit to the kinds of text we can ask students to write. Our decisions, though, will be based on how much language the students know, what their interests are and what we think will not only be useful for them but also motivate them as well.

What do writing sequences look like?

The four examples of writing we are going to look at show a range of level and complexity.

Example 1: postcards (elementary)

In this example at the elementary level, students *Study* a particular type of writing and then write something which is very similar in design and structure to what they have just been looking at.

The teacher starts by having students look at this postcard.

We're staying at a lovely hotel near the beach. We get up late every day and have a large breakfast. Then we lie around all morning, swimming and reading. After lunch – siesta! Then it's more swimming and a late supper. Paradise!
 Tomorrow we're going to Isla Mujeres (Island of the Women).
 See you soon,

Love
 Mary



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The teacher checks that the students understand the information in the card and then she asks them to identify four different patterns in it: the present continuous ('We're staying at a lovely hotel ...'), the present simple ('We get up late every day ...'), verbless sentences, postcard style ('After lunch – siesta!') and present continuous for future ('Tomorrow we're going ...').

The students then discuss the fact that, in postcards, greetings (like 'Dear Judy') are not necessary. Signings-off are informal ('Love Mary').

Now that students have examined the structure of the postcard, the teacher asks them to imagine that they too are on holiday. They must decide where. She tells them that they, too, must send a postcard to an English-speaking friend. Like the example postcard, they should say where they are, what they do every day, what they're doing tomorrow/next week etc., and they should sign off informally.

When the students have completed the task, the teacher can collect the postcards and correct them later (see below page 84) or the students can read them out, or they can show their cards to other people.

This postcard activity is an example of 'parallel writing' – where students stick closely to a model they have been given, and where the model guides their own efforts. It is especially useful for the kind of formulaic writing represented by postcards, certain kinds of letters, announcements and invitations, for example.

Example 2: altering dictations (intermediate)

In this activity, the teacher dictates statements which students have to alter to suit their own preferences and priorities. It is a writing activity which is especially useful during a lesson sequence which is designed to ask people

to take positions on a certain subject – and can therefore be used as a prelude to a discussion, or a controversial reading, for example.

The teacher tells students she is going to dictate a number of sentences. However, the students should change the sentences as she dictates them so that they reflect their own points of view. In other words, the sentence they write down will be an amended form of the sentence the teacher starts with. As an example the teacher reads this sentence.

Human beings do not treat animals well.

and tells students to re-write the sentence to suit their own feelings. She may read this original sentence more than once and she then gives students time to complete their sentences. Here are examples of what students might write:

Some people think that human beings do not treat animals well, but I do not think this is very important.

Human beings must treat animals better because they are living creatures too.

The teacher then reads out more sentences, giving students adequate time to alter them, e.g.

The way people treat animals tells you what kind of people they are. There is no difference between killing animals for food and killing people in war.

If all the world was vegetarian, we'd all be a lot happier.

The students then compare what they have written in pairs or groups before reading them out to the class. The teacher only corrects where there are glaring errors. Alternatively, pairs and groups could be asked to pool their sentences and come up with a new one which represents a fair compromise between the various points of view.

The finished sentences either then lead into a reading or listening text about vegetarianism – or they may form the start of a discussion activity (see Chapter 9).

Example 3: newspaper headlines/articles (intermediate)

In this sequence, the teacher introduces students to the way newspaper headlines are constructed and then gets students to write their own newspaper articles. The sequence starts when the teacher asks the students if they read newspapers, and what they read about. They have a short discussion. The teacher then gets students to match newspaper headlines with the stories they came from, as in the following example.

1 Match the newspaper headlines with the stories they came from.

a

Neighbour slams rock party

i

At the monthly meeting of the housing committee of Barkingside district council, chairman Geoffrey Caspar resigned dramatically when his opposite number Glenda Beckett

b

Housing chief quits at stormy meeting

ii

When his neighbours played loud music until three in the morning Philip Mitchell (82) went mad. "I couldn't stand it any more," he said. "I'm an old man and I need

- The teacher now elicits the facts that, for example, headlines frequently use the present simple tense and invariably leave out articles and auxiliaries. She might point out that there is special vocabulary for headlines (e.g. 'slams' for 'complains about', 'quits' instead of 'leaves').
- Students are then asked to choose one of the following topics: a disaster, a neighbourhood quarrel, a resignation/sudden departure of a public figure, a sports triumph, a scandal involving a public figure (actor, politician etc.). In pairs, they have to think of a short story to go with the topic they have chosen.
- The pairs now write the headlines for their stories and write them up on the board for the rest of the class — who have to guess what the story is about. The teacher can suggest changes, corrections and amendments to the headlines during this stage of the lesson.
- The students then write articles to go with the headlines. While they are doing this, the teacher goes round the class offering them help when and if they need it.
- The teacher can stick the articles up on the class noticeboard or, if this is not possible, have students read their stories out to the rest of the class.
- Newspaper writing can be used in a number of different ways. In this example, for instance, when pairs have made up a headline they can give it to another pair who have to use it to invent a story of their own. Or perhaps all the headlines could be detached from their newspaper articles so that a new matching exercise could take place.

Example 4: report writing (advanced)

In this example for an upper intermediate or advanced level class, the writing task forms part of a much longer project-like sequence. The teacher is going to get students to write a report about leisure activities.

The teacher introduces the topic and asks students to give her any words they associate with leisure activities. She writes them on the board and adds any of her own that she thinks the students need.

She then asks students to design a questionnaire which will find out how people spend their leisure time (see pages 89-90 for the use of questionnaires as speaking activities). When they have collected the information they need through their questionnaires, they discuss how they are going to write the report. This is where the teacher will introduce some of the features of report writing that are necessary for the task, e.g. 'In order to find out how people spend their leisure time we ...' or 'One surprising fact to emerge was that ...' and 'The results of our survey suggest that ...' etc. As with many examples of writing style, the teacher can suggest ways in which the text should be constructed (what comes in the

introduction, middle paragraphs and conclusion) and offer language which the writing style uses (as in our report-writing example above).

The students now draft their reports which the teacher collects to correct. When she hands them back, the students write them up in final form and show them to their colleagues to see if they all said more or less the same thing.

How should teachers correct writing?

Most students find it very dispiriting if they get a piece of written work back and it is covered in red ink, underlinings and crossings-out. It is a powerful visual statement of the fact that their written English is terrible.

Of course, some pieces of written work are completely full of mistakes, but even in these cases, over-correction can have a very demotivating effect. As with all types of correction, the teacher has to achieve a balance between being accurate and truthful on the one hand and treating students sensitively and sympathetically on the other.

One way of avoiding the 'over-correction' problem is for teachers to tell their students that for a particular piece of work they are only going to correct mistakes of punctuation, or spelling, or grammar etc. This has two advantages: it makes students concentrate on that particular aspect, and it cuts down on the correction.

Another technique which many teachers use is to agree on a list of written symbols (S = spelling, WO = word order etc). When they come across a mistake they underline it discreetly and write the symbol in the margin. This makes correction look less damaging.

However many mistakes you may want to identify, it is always worth writing a comment at the end of a piece of written work – anything from 'Well done' to 'This is a good story, but you must look again at your use of past tenses – see X grammar book page 00'.

Two last points: correcting is important, but it can be time-consuming and frustrating, especially when it is difficult to know what the mistake is because it is unclear what the student is trying to say. Common sense and talking to students about it are the only solutions here. The other really important point is that correction is worthless if students just put their corrected writing away and never look at it again. Teachers have to ensure that they understand the problem and then redraft the passage correctly.

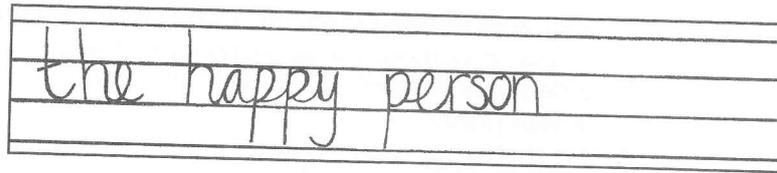
What can be done about handwriting?

Handwriting is a very personal matter. It is supposed to reflect character. Different nationalities certainly have recognisable handwriting traits. Some people have easily readable writing. Some produce written work which is indecipherable, whether beautiful or messy and ugly.

Many nationalities do not use the same kind of script as English, so for students from those cultures writing in English is doubly difficult: they are fighting their expressive limitations as well as trying to work out a completely new writing system at the same time. And now that word processors are becoming more and more common, people have less motivation for good handwriting.

Teachers are not in a position to ask students to change their

handwriting style, but they can insist on neatness and legibility. Especially when students are heading towards an exam, such things are crucial. With students who are having problems with English script, special classes or group sessions may have to be arranged to help them. In these classes they can be shown many examples of certain letters, and the teacher can demonstrate the strokes necessary for making those shapes – and where the letter starts (writing from left to right is difficult for some students). They can be asked to write 'in the air' to give them confidence or they can be asked to imitate letters on lined paper which demonstrates the position and height of letters, e.g.



How does writing fit into ESA?

The four writing examples in this chapter approach the *ESA* procedure from a number of different angles. In the case of the postcard the teacher may first talk to students about postcards and/or holidays in such a way as to *Engage* them. They then *Study* the postcard looking for typical 'postcard features' and finally they *Activate* that knowledge by writing their own version.

In the 'altering dictations' activity, the students are, hopefully, *Engaged* by the dictation and topic of the sentence they write down. When they alter the sentence they are *Activating* the knowledge of English which they have. After the discussion (*Activate*) which this will provoke, the teacher will give feedback on the language used, making corrections where appropriate (*Study*).

A different kind of boomerang procedure is evident in the newspaper-writing activity. Students are first *Engaged* with the topic of newspapers before doing the matching task (*Activate*). They then *Study* headlines before going on to a creative writing stage (*Activate*).

In report writing, a number of stages are gone through, giving the whole sequence a patchwork feel. Students need to be *Engaged* with the topic, they need to *Study* the language which they will need, knowledge which is *Activated* in the collection of results before students come back to study the structure of reports in order to produce a final piece of work (*Activation*).

More writing suggestions

- 1 Students write letters to a newspaper in response to a controversial article. (intermediate/advanced)
- 2 Students expand a variety of headlines into newspaper articles. (intermediate/advanced)
- 3 Students write/design their own menus. (beginner/lower intermediate)
- 4 Students design posters for a party/play/concert etc. (beginner/lower intermediate)
- 5 Students write a radio news bulletin. (elementary/intermediate)

- 6 Students write a letter of application for a job. (any level)
- 7 Students write the description of a room while listening to music. (intermediate)
- 8 Students send e-mail messages (real or simulated) to other English speakers around the world. (any level)
- 9 Students write invitations of various kinds. (elementary/intermediate)

Conclusions

In this chapter we have

- looked at the reasons for teaching writing: reinforcement of learnt language, the development of the students' language through the activity of writing, the appropriacy of the activity of writing for some styles of learning and the importance of writing as a skill in its own right.
- said that what students write will depend on level and the motivational effect of the task. In general, students should practise writing postcards, letters, forms, narratives, reports and articles – as well as (perhaps) more frivolous tasks.
- studied four writing sequences.
- tackled the difficult subject of correcting writing, suggesting that over-correction should be avoided and that teachers should always strive to be encouraging.
- pointed out that, while handwriting is a matter of style, teachers should expect students to write clearly and legibly. In some cases, students may need special help in the shaping of letters, for example.

Looking ahead

- The next two chapters are about the spoken word. They mirror many of the comments made about reading and writing.
- After that comes Chapter 11 on textbook use, a vital teacher skill, and then Chapter 12 on lesson planning.