Contexts for writing and teaching about genre

We begin with an overview of purposeful writing tasks that apply to teaching any genre, before covering relevant teacher knowledge, including for teaching specific genres – narrative texts, reports and persuasive writing.

Purposeful writing tasks

Setting writing tasks that are purposeful is essential for every writing genre.

Set writing tasks that are interesting and extending

Writing tasks need to be interesting and extending. Integrate learning from other curriculum areas so that students get to write on topics that take them beyond the limits of their own imagination.

Be truly child-centred in your choices. What topics would excite a primary age student? Our 'go to' science-based topics include dinosaurs, volcanoes, the solar system, apex predators and extreme weather. Or students could write about moments in history – the sinking of the *Titanic* or the first Moon landing. Another idea is to explore the context of a class novel – set in a different time (such as Michael Morpurgo's *An Elephant in the Garden* or Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*). For narrative writing, explore the story setting: write stories set under the sea, in a dark forest, in a future world or in an old, abandoned house.

Show students that we write for a purpose

Students need to know that writing can be used for a variety of purposes, and that we write with this in mind. More authentic tasks will support intentional writing (McCutcheon 1988). For example, the task "Write the biography of a local war veteran, to be published in the school newsletter" may encourage students to consider purpose-related goals such as to write in clear, interesting ways and treat the material respectfully. A task such as "Write about what you did in the holidays" is less likely to inspire such thinking.

Teach knowledge of genre and text structures

We need to explicitly teach knowledge of different genres, including conventions of style and structure. Stay with one type of writing for a few weeks but plan for many different tasks to keep the learning interesting. Support students to plan for these different text types and, later, to evaluate their work. Other activities may also be useful, such as having students analyse model examples, or rewrite texts using a different structure from the original (Reynolds and Perin 2009).

Teacher knowledge for teaching genre

Here we look briefly at the different conventions and structures of three genres. We also cover how you can support students to develop their skills with paragraph writing and planning their writing.

Narrative text

Conventions of style. Stories usually include a setting, characters and a problem. They can be imaginary or based on a real-life experience. They need to engage the reader.

Stories can be written in the first person (*I*) or the third person (*he, she, they*). They are usually written in the past tense. The writer must be consistent throughout.

The writer describes the setting and characters to help their readers imagine them. Useful descriptive techniques for this purpose include metaphorical language, specific nouns (eg, *the old oak* instead of *tree*), and – in conveying sounds – alliteration and onomatopoeia.

Transition words and phrases help to sequence the story:

> Examples
> *It all started when … The first sign of trouble was … After some time … Later that day … Meanwhile …*

Using direct speech helps bring the story to life.

Structure. Approaches to structuring narrative stories include:

- introducing the setting and characters first, then introducing the problem, before moving on to describe the action and finally the ending
- introducing the problem or action in the very first paragraph to 'hook the reader in'.

Reports

Conventions of style. Scientific or historical reports use third person. When recounting a personal experience, the writer may use first person.

Many reports use precise language. For example, a report about the water cycle may include words such as *water vapour* and *precipitation*.

Report writers find transition words and phrases useful to connect ideas.

> Examples
> *First … In addition … In particular … In sum … To conclude …*

Structure. A report starts with an introduction. This tells the reader what they will be learning about and engages them with the topic. The following paragraphs provide further information and details.

The report should end with a conclusion. Here, the writer may summarise the main ideas covered and/or present a question for future research.

Persuasive writing

Conventions of style. A piece of persuasive writing may be written in the first person.

The writer often uses inclusive language to get the reader 'on side'.

Examples
We must … For the sake our future …

The writer may use a personal anecdote or emotive language to engage the reader.

They include evidence – facts and data – to support the argument. Some introductory phrases help to flag such evidence.

Examples
For example … To illustrate … For instance … The evidence is clear: …

The writer may quote from an expert.

Transition words can either:

- connect ideas: *First; In addition; Demonstrably; Clearly; Significantly, Evidently*
- signal a new or different argument: *However; On the other hand; Although*.

Structure. Persuasive texts begin with an introduction that presents the argument and engages the reader. The following paragraphs provide evidence supporting the writer's argument.

One paragraph should present arguments different from the point of view the writer is arguing for, and the evidence for them.

The text should finish with a conclusion that inspires the reader to think and learn more. This may highlight an interesting point already made or present a question for future research.

Paragraphs

A paragraph should be at least three sentences long for beginning writers. It could begin with a topic sentence, introducing the main idea of the paragraph. The following sentences add more detailed information about that topic.

In some well-written paragraphs, a topic sentence may not be entirely obvious. In these cases, the sentences work together to convey meaning and the main idea is implied.

From a teaching perspective, it may be counterproductive to get too fussy over the paragraph structure. Think about the writer's purpose and evaluate the strength of the paragraph in relation to this. If the student is writing a report, for example, ask yourself: is the information presented in a clear, coherent and logical way?

Student planning for different text structures

1. Use graphic organisers for planning and for peer evaluation:
   - Model their use.
   - Support students as they create their own plans.
   - If planning is challenging, choose a planning goal from the Fast Feedback scope and sequence.

2. Teach tactile planning as a flexible strategy that will work for any genre:[1]
   - Give students five small pieces of paper (or Post-it notes) to plan a five-paragraph report, story or opinion piece.
   - Students record subtopics at the top of each piece of paper.
   - They add key words and phrases, for detail, below each subtopic heading.
   - They order the pieces of paper into a booklet, from the piece on paragraph one at the top of the pile and so on through to the piece on paragraph five at the bottom. They staple the papers together and refer to the booklet as they write. For some students, tearing off each page as they finish a paragraph reinforces a sense of self-efficacy and motivation (Brann 2001).

3. Use a human continuum to generate ideas for persuasive writing topics:[2]
   - Write a statement on the class whiteboard – for example, "Learning to swim is more important than learning to read".
   - Display four opinion cards – *Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree* – at different points across a classroom wall in this order so that the strong opinions are at opposite ends of the wall.
   - Tell students to think about their level of agreement with the statement and their reasons for this response. Then ask them to move to stand by the card that indicates their level of agreement. Ask them to move without talking.
   - When students have found their places on the continuum, invite them to share their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the statement. After hearing from a few students, give everyone an opportunity to change where they are standing.

1 Thanks to Barbara Brann for this technique.

2 Thanks to the tutors at the New Zealand Graduate School of Education for this technique.