

# Writing for ideas and expression . . . . .

Many pupils find the act of writing difficult or threatening because it has an all-at-once quality to it. When we write, we sort out our thoughts, see relationships, try to find words, put word in order, check to see if we are expressing what we intended, imagine what an reader would make of our writing, check, alter, correct and so on. When pupils try to cope with this all-at-onceness while knowing that their writing will be judged, they are put under substantial pressure. Many cannot cope and will want to avoid writing if possible. Teachers, recognising this, may resort to setting writinig less frequently, defining it exclusively as 'writing for an audience', and providing memory aids for pupils about what features of expression will bring them success in tests and other assessments.

Unfortunately, this move away from frequent writing disrupts the important continuum between developing ideas for oneself, and being able to express those idea for an audience.

It would be better to ask pupils to write frequently but to be clear with them what each piece of writing is for, what degree of elaboration and care you are after, and what response they can expect. To clarify the nature the writing you require from pupils, I suggest you refer to two broad categories: writing for ideas (or *i*-writing) and writing for ideas *plus* expression (*ie*-writing)

## *i*-writing . . . . .

The term *i*-writing is one that you and the pupils can use to signify low-risk ideas-writing. with the following characteristics:

1. It's purpose is to enable pupils to discover, gather and sort their ideas through writing.
2. It will normally be a limited activity – limited by time taken, or lines written or the number of items to be included in a list.
3. It is sometimes shared and sometimes not, but it is primarily writing for oneself.
4. It is sometimes collected and read by a teacher who tells pupils she is genuinely interested in their ideas. When *i*-writing is collected in, it is marked with simple tick to indicate that the task, as set, has been understood and completed.
5. It is done either in *i*-writing exercise books or on paper given out for particular *i*-writing activities.

### When to use *i*-writing

Use *i*-writing in close relationship with both oral dialogue and private reflection. For example, you could ask pupils to do *i*-writing for the following purposes:

1. To gather questions or key themes leading to inquiry through oral dialogue.
2. As a 'thinking break' during an oral dialogue to gather and sort ideas.
3. As a way gathering thoughts immediately after an oral dialogue.
4. As a means of reflecting on an oral dialogue or a sequence of dialogues.
5. As a means of responding to reading in preparation for oral dialogue or further writing.
6. As a means of activating prior knowledge and listing 'what one knows' prior to oral dialogue, writing or reading.

7. As a means of reflecting on one's own extended writing.
8. To record ideas for future refinement or elaboration.

This list suggests a culture of learning and teaching in which teachers and pupils value dialogue. Writing supports the dialogical process and dialogue supports the writing. Philosophy for children (p4c) is an initiative that promotes dialogical learning and teaching and is therefore an ideal context for *i*-writing. However, learning in all subject areas could benefit from episodes of *i*-writing, so long as the culture is dialogical.

### **An example of *i*-writing: listing reasons as 'because' clauses**

A later chapter is devoted to suggestions for *i*-writing. I offer the following example to give an indication of what one sort of *i*-writing would be like in practice.

During oral dialogues, opinions are often expressed and claims made. You will want pupils to be able to support their opinions with reasons. You can do this by asking for reasons during a dialogue, drawing attention to the importance of giving reasons and making reason-giving part of your evaluations with pupils. You could also ask pupils to do some *i*-writing on any of the opinions or claims that have arisen during their talk. You might want to select one particular opinion for reflection, in which case you might ask for reasons *for* and *against*.

**Method:** Tell the pupils that they are going to do some *i*-writing in their *i*-writing books or on paper (if on paper, they should begin with their name and the date). Say you want each of them to write a list of reasons in support of an opinion or claim using a list of 'because' clauses. You could say:

'Write out the opinion and take 5 minutes to list at least 3 reasons supporting the opinion. Start each line with 'because'.

*An example opinion taken from a dialogue might be: 'People should never tell lies.' Sample reasons a pupil devises might be:*

1. 'because lying is wrong'
2. 'because it can get you into trouble.'
3. 'because you would be to blame if something bad happened.'
4. 'because grown ups tell you no to tell lies.'

This activity of listing reasons as 'because' clauses could assist the oral dialogue for at least six reasons:

1. It gives pupils time to gather ideas and reflect.
2. It emphasises the important practice of giving reasons to support an opinion.
3. It encourages pupils to think of more than one reason.
4. It connects the word 'because' to one of its important roles – as a signifier of reasons to support opinions as distinct from its use as a signifier of cause-effect relationships.
5. It provides visible material for further discussion, analysis and amendment.
6. It introduces pupils to a method they can use whenever they want to clarify an argument (a claim supported by a reason) for themselves in a way that is succinct and memorable.

The activity is suitable for learners from nursery to university level. Sara Stanley writes about a version of it for very young children in her two items on p4c.com: 'A nursery question board' (<http://www.p4c.com/node/459>) and 'Would you prefer' (<http://www.p4c.com/node/505>). Ramage, Bean and Johnson suggest the activity in their comprehensive book on argumentative writing for graduates'.<sup>1</sup>

### Developing the *i*-writing activity: more on 'because' clauses

After your pupils have completed the *i*-writing activity. What do you do next? There are plenty of good options. Which ones you take will depend on your priorities at the time. Some alternatives are:

1. Simply have the pupils pass their *i*-writing around and read each others' ideas silently. For this purpose, form groups with numbers appropriate to the time you have available for reading. Fifteen seconds per turn at reading is probably sufficient. Pupils will quickly get an overview of a range of reasons.
2. Pupils who chose the same or similar opinions form groups and share their reasons as above. You could also ask them to talk about which reasons seem most *important* or if they could identify reasons of similar kinds *eg*, ones that refer to *rules* and others to *consequences*. You could ask them to give *examples* of consequences (*eg*, some 'bad things' that might happen if a person told lies). In this way, the logical connection between an opinion and a reason leads to more connection-making and so the dialogue deepens.
3. Ask pupils to share reasons they thought were either strong or weak and invite the whole group to agree or disagree and say why.
4. Collect the writing in. You will know who has written each piece because the names will be there on their paper or on *the i*-writing book cover. Review the writing and check if every pupil has understood the connection between an opinion and a reason. This will give you valuable knowledge for future lesson planning. You might also make a note of a few of the most interesting reasons to use in a future activity, not least one that involves you helping pupils make a transition from *i*-writing to *ie*-writing.

### Transition activities: from *i*-writing to *ie*-writing

You can help pupils focus on expression by telling them you are going to do some writing and they are going to help you by making suggestions. Take an opinion and three supporting reasons and begin putting them together in a continuous piece of writing. You can show pupils the processes of trying out, auditing for meaning, elaborating and selecting from possible alternatives — in other words, revising and editing. The opinion and reasons you start with could be taken from the pupils' own *i*-writing. Now you are using them as a starter for a writing lesson.

**Method:** You, the teacher, are going to do the writing and you will be thinking aloud while you are doing it. You will also be asking pupils to give you all the assistance that they can manage and to assess the outcomes of your writing.

**Example:** Imagine using the opinion mentioned earlier and reasons pupils may have devised:  
'People should never tell lies.'

1. 'because it can get you into trouble.'
2. 'because lying is wrong'
3. 'because you would be to blame if something bad happened.'

Use your own experience as a writer and thinker to inform your prompts and questions to pupils and your attempts at writing. You will be asking yourself questions like: How will I link and group the reasons? Should I elaborate on any of the reasons by giving examples (such as bad things that might happen or lies that might lead to bad things happening)? What are the alternatives ways of expressing and linking the reasons? Which alternatives are preferable and why?

One example of a conversation you might have about the writing is to ask pupils for their suggested order of reasons. Reasons 1 and 3 refer to possible consequences while reason 2 refers to a rule or maxim. It would make sense, therefore to group reasons 1 and 3 together. Whether you put the rule or the consequences first will depend on which kind of reason you and the pupils decide is most important.

We can see that the dialogue following from this problem of choice would be very like one that could arise in a whole-class oral dialogue to establish meaning. Writing for ideas and expression requires a dialogue with oneself.<sup>2</sup> Oral dialogue prepares pupils to have that internal dialogue. Writing gives pupils opportunities to reflect, at their own pace, on the meanings they are in the process of creating and so it hones their meaning-making skills. Writing and oral dialogue support each other.

When you write for and with pupils (a process often referred to as 'shared writing'), there are many possible turns the dialogue about the writing could take depending on the pupils' ages and abilities. The advantage of a dialogic, rather than a prescriptive, approach to teaching expression is that you can gauge your responses to those of the pupils and to the problems inherent in expressing the particular ideas in question. (We will be putting some videos on the p4c.com website with examples of transition activities carried out by teachers.

## *ie-writing*

The term *ie-writing* is one that you and the pupils can use as to signify writing with the following characteristics.

1. It's purpose is to have pupils elaborate on their ideas and express them in ways that can be understood with interest and enjoyment by other readers.
2. It will involve thinking about alternative ways of expressing ideas and choosing expressions that seem best.
3. It will involve reading one's own work aloud and editing it.
4. It will be read by others who will often respond through talk or writing.
5. When *ie-writing* is collected in and read by the teacher, it is marked with a response to the ideas and to the expression.
6. It is sometimes published or read aloud in class.

### Short or long?

*ie*-writing can be as short as a few sentences or as long as a fully-elaborated argument, dialogue or story. The length will depend on the ages and abilities of pupils and the place of a particular piece of writing within the whole programme of writing and inquiry. There is certainly value in short pieces of *ie*-writing because they are manageable and suitable for comparison and analysis. Also, short *ie*-writing is not such a great step away from the low-risk, low-anxiety *i*-writing that pupils will use regularly in your lessons.

### Audience and dialogue

The term 'writing for an audience', in the sense that it is used in school literacy lessons, is not the same as writing in a context of dialogical learning and teaching. Writing for an audience does not necessarily assume a response; writing dialogically does. When we ask pupils to write for an audience, we often mean an imaginary audience who, in reality do not respond. However, when writing is thought of dialogically, there is always a response in mind, even if the writing is for oneself. When I write a to-do list, I respond by doing things or amending the list. When I write this material, I expect people will read it, agree with it and use it, or disagree with it and perhaps criticise it in writing.

The most accessible audience for pupils are other pupils, their teachers and their families. When pupils write dialogically, they engage these audiences and can expect responses. This responsiveness allows us to realise the true value of writing.<sup>3</sup> We are reminded of John Dewey's comment that education should be a process of living not a preparation for future living.<sup>4</sup>

So, *ie*-writing can be long or short but it arises from dialogue and leads back into dialogue. That is not to say we shouldn't introduce pupils to the concept of different audiences and appropriate expression for those audiences but that ongoing dialogue through talk, reading and writing should be the primary context for *ie*-writing.

### Examples of *ie*-writing

A later chapter will be devoted to suggestions for *ie*-writing. Here, I will just give a few examples so that the concept is comprehensible. All these examples assume that pupils engage in classroom dialogue about topics and concepts that matter to them. Philosophy for Children is an exemplary educational initiative in this respect.<sup>5</sup>

1. Pupils have been discussing a range of opinions about a topic that interests them. During the discussion they list reasons for and against some of the opinions in the form of *because clauses*. They choose an opinion they think is significant and then do a piece of *ie*-writing, giving their reasons for supporting or rejecting it. The teacher collects the writing and uses selected responses as a the starting point of a follow-up discussion. Selections could also be published in a collection edited by a team of pupils. Written responses are invited from pupils (including pupils in other classes) or from parents.
2. Class discussions keep returning to questions about certain concepts such as fairness and identity in their discussions. Pupils are invited to invent and explain a scenario involving one of the concepts such as a person being treated unfairly. A further challenge is to write about a 'borderline case' where they are not sure whether the example really is an example of unfairness but that it could be. A selection of scenarios could be brought back to the class for discussion. Some could be developed into stories, others could be combined as examples into essays or written dialogues.

3. Pupils write a dialogue between two characters. The dialogue tackles a question or concept that interests the writers. The products are shared and discussed by pupils in small groups.
4. The class share a weekly letter, written by the teacher or a pupil. The letter introduces and includes a piece of writing that could be informative, argumentative, poetic or narrative and would be read out loud to the whole class. Letters of this kind require a lot of planning and support. They would deserve further discussion, response and analysis.

### **Reading out loud**

Reading out loud is very helpful to the processes of revising and editing that are essential to *ie*-writing. It also reminds pupils that writing can be an act of human giving. Reading out loud can come about in several ways.

*Pupils read their own writing to themselves.* Writers organise their ideas and compose. Then they must become readers and audit the meaning and expression of their writing before becoming writers again and then readers and so on. This back-and-forth shifting of identity from writer to reader is necessary for effective writing. The practice of reading their work out loud helps pupils to make this necessary shift in identity. They hear their own voice as the voice of another — the reader. Parts of a text that are awkward or unclear seem all the more noticeable when read aloud, as do parts of a text that are powerful or apposite. The reading needn't be distracting for others. Get pupils to put their hands over one or both ears as they read. They will hear even their quietest voice.

While reading their own work out loud, pupils can mark obvious errors, sections that don't sound quite right and also parts they are happy with. They can try out alternative ways of expressing the problematic sections. This, of course, assumes an awareness of conventions as well as possible alternative expressions, but that comes through regular work – led by the teacher – on shared writing, comparing writing, and establishing criteria with which to monitor writing.

*Pupils read their own writing to others.* There is great value in simply having pupils read their work out loud to others, even if the only outcome is for it to be heard, without comment. Simply being heard is a powerful experience and one that encourages pupils to take greater responsibility for their thoughts and words. Peter Elbow<sup>6</sup> stresses that writing is an important human act of giving. A classroom where the teacher organises small groups to regularly read their *ie*-writing writing to each other is an environment that promotes literacy and dialogue.

*Pupils hear their own writing read by others.* Having pupils pair up and read each other's texts out loud, allows them to experience their own words as a reader in an even more powerful way than they do when reading their text out loud to themselves. The difficulties that each partner experiences while reading will provide plenty indications of parts of a text that need further consideration. This act of sharing out loud could also lead, with your encouragement, to a dialogue between pupils about the expression of the ideas within each text. Your own transition lessons (as described above) will provide a model for the kinds of discussion pupils might share. Oral classroom dialogues such as those in philosophy for children sessions will provide models for discussion of the ideas themselves.

### **Feedback**

Peter Elbow makes a distinction between two kinds of feedback on writing: *reader-based feedback* and *criterion-based feedback*.<sup>7</sup> Criterion-based feedback helps writers to know how their writing

measures up to certain pre-established standards for good writing in particular genres. Examples might be: *Were the ideas interesting? Were they well organised? Did you write in complete sentences? Did you use strong verbs?*

Reader-based feedback reveals how the writing affects readers directly. *What did they feel as they were reading or listening? Which parts did they find striking or affecting without necessarily knowing why? What did they understand the writing to mean? What did they agree or disagree with the most?* If pupils' writing is used dialogically, much reader-based feedback arises naturally during classroom discussion.

Feeding back, used together with reading aloud in pairs, stimulates and guides pupils to revise and edit their work. A future chapter is devoted to feedback, developing criteria with pupils and marking.

### **Editing (including revising)**

Editing is a chore, but it is also what makes writing so worthwhile. When they edit, pupils grapple with meaning and try to make their ideas clearer and more powerful. Pupils should know what level of editing you expect them to do for each piece of *ie*-writing. You can help them in some of the following ways:

- Show them how you edit and revise in the transition lessons you share with them.
- Have them edit in response to the reading aloud they do with partners (from correcting words missed out to trying to make a confusingly-expressed idea clearer).
- Negotiate criteria with them for the writing they do. They can edit their work according to the criterion-based feedback they get.

It is also possible that when writing is shared in a dialogic environment, for example as a stimulus for discussion, pupils may want to rewrite their work because what others say matters to them. When I make an argument to people, orally or in writing, and they disagree or say they don't understand me, I am stimulated to think again and respond.

A future chapter devoted to *ie*-writing will explore the issue of revising and editing further and make practical suggestions.

### **Marking**

Peter Elbow's distinction between reader-based feedback and criterion-based feedback is also relevant to your marking. Marking is feedback from a powerful and knowledgeable person – the teacher. When you negotiate criteria for the *ie*-writing you set, you will be able to mark according to the criteria. You will be asking: 'Have the pupils tried to do what I asked of them in their writing?' Criterion-based marking is efficient and effective.

However, pupils will find reader-based feedback from you to be very encouraging. Your response need not be a mini-essay. It could be a short comment to say, 'Thank you, it made me think you are interested in this topic.' or 'I wasn't sure what your main argument was.'

### **Writing for ideas and expression**

The next chapters give suggestions for *i*-writing, transition lessons and *ie*-writing. They will be tackled separately but they should be thought of as part of a continuous process, a process in which thinking, talking, listening and writing stimulate, support and extend each other through a literate community of inquiry.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> John D. Ramage, John C. Bean and June Johnson, *Writing Arguments: A Rhetoric with Readings*, Sixth Edition, Pearson/Longman, 2004
- <sup>2</sup> Janet Emig argues that writing is a significant 'mode of learning' because it is active, engaged, personal, generative of connections and slow. It also provides immediate feedback because the process (of thinking) is immediately available in the product (the writing). Internal dialogue is necessary to link the process and the product. See Janet Emig, 'Writing as a mode of learning,' *The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Thinking, Learning and Teaching*. Boynton/Cook. 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> Valantin Voloshinov argues for the value of this dialogical aspect to writing. 'Dialogue', he says: '... can also be understood in a broader sense, meaning not only direct, face-to-face, vocalized verbal communication between persons, but also verbal communication of any type whatsoever. A book, i.e., a verbal performance in print, is also an element of verbal communication. It is something discussible in actual, real life dialogue, but aside from that, it is calculated for active perception, involving attentive reading and inner responsiveness, and for organized, printed reaction in the various forms devised by the particular sphere of verbal communication in question (book reviews, critical surveys, defining influence on subsequent works, and so on).' See Valantin Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Harvard, 1973 p7.
- <sup>4</sup> See John Dewey, 'My Pedagogic Creed', *Dewey's Education Writings*, Ed. by F.W. Garforth. London: Heinemann, 1966
- <sup>5</sup> Matthew Lipman, the founder of philosophy for children writes: 'One of the most felicitous features of animated classroom conversation is that it combines a maximum of intellectual stimulation with only a fairly limited number of opportunities to contribute ... But as they [pupils] subsequently reflect on the matter, they begin to realize how many things followed from what they had to say and how important it would have been to elaborate on the point of view that had received such truncated expression. In short, the very limitations and frustrations of classroom exchanges translate themselves into increased motivation for writing.' See: Matthew Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School*, 1988, Temple University Press. p.129.
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power*, Second Edition, Oxford, 1988.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Elbow, *ibid*, 240-251