Embedding Literacy in Subject Teaching

Practical ideas and strategies to help place literacy at the heart of your lessons

Quick reads: Writing
The Teaching Compendium

A series of short reads; think of it as a library of ideas, strategies, activities and tips for teaching. Putting theory into practice.

- Embedding literacy in subject teaching
- How to use Bloom’s Taxonomy in the classroom
- Planning brilliant lessons
- Strategies to help you excel when being observed
- Your differentiation masterclass
- Strategies to develop independent learners
- Raising achievement in your classroom
- Time-saving tips for teachers
- Helping students to revise – a teacher’s guide
- Practical strategies for active learning
- Getting the most out of gifted students
- Exciting end of term activities

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Acknowledgments

About the author

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Together these resources have been viewed and downloaded more than 2 million times by teachers in over 180 countries. Mike teaches at King Edward VI School in Bury St Edmunds. He divides his time between Suffolk, London and Yorkshire.

He is the author of six books on teaching and learning, including three bestsellers, and has a number forthcoming in 2013-2014:

How to use Assessment for Learning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide
How to use Differentiation in the Classroom: The Complete Guide
How to use Questioning in the Classroom: The Complete Guide
How to use Discussion in the Classroom: The Complete Guide
How to teach EAL Students in the Classroom: The Complete Guide
More Secondary Starters and Plenaries: Creative activities, ready-to-use in any subject
Writing

Writing frames

Writing frames allow students to put concerns about structure aside and concentrate solely on the content of their work. This is a great help for students who struggle with writing.

1. Sentence starters

Give students a series of sentence starters, one for each paragraph you want them to write. Each sentence starter should give students a clear indication of what that section of the work needs to contain (‘My first point is…’; ‘In my opinion, the most important factor was…’).

2. Detailed frame

Give students a hand out that lists what should be included in each part of their work. This could be broken down by paragraph or by section, depending on the type of writing.

3. Overview

Give students a vague overview of what each part of their work should be about. For example, an essay overview might look like this: Paragraph 1 = Introduction; Paragraphs 2-4 = arguments for; Paragraphs 5-7 = arguments against; Paragraph 8 = conclusion.

4. PEE (Point, Evidence, Explain)

PEE is an acronym: Point, Evidence, Explain. This provides a framework for structuring essay paragraphs.

First, a statement is made. Next, evidence is given to back up this statement. Evidence could take the form of an example, a fact or a quotation from another text. Finally, the point is explained in more detail to convey the author’s thoughts, knowledge and understanding.

When teaching students to use PEE, three options you can call on are as follows:

a. Display posters showing the PEE method around the room or place hand-outs in students’ books.

b. Model an example of PEE based on the writing task you have set.

c. Encourage students to use the method check that they are doing it in every paragraph by including the use of PEE in a set of success criteria.
Using sentence starters

Sentence starters can also be useful beyond writing frames. Here are three possible ways to make use of them:

1. Group starter

Set the class a writing task and then either display or write a sentence starter on the board. This is a great way to get students up and running with a piece of writing. It provides a fixed point to move off from and eliminates the trauma of trying to decide how to begin.

2. Individual starters

During a writing task, walk around the room and observe which students may need help. Offer a sentence starter to those who are struggling. This should help them to move forward with their work.

3. Starter display

Make a wall display containing a number of common sentence starters. Pupils will then have these to hand for whenever they feel unsure about how to begin a piece of work or a new paragraph.

Exemplar work

Exemplar work is an excellent tool to help students improve their writing, as it allows them to see models of both good and poor writing practice. It can be used as a model to aspire to, as an example of where things can go wrong and how corrections can be made or as a starting point for discussion.

1. Bank of work

During the course of the year, collect work produced by students. The selection should represent a wide range of ability levels and different standards of writing and should illustrate examples of common mistakes, innovation and good practice. Laminate this work and share it with your class during the following year.

Prior to laminating, you may wish to annotate the work using a different coloured pen. Your comments should draw attention to the positive and negative aspects of the writing. If necessary, stick the work to a larger sheet of paper and write around it.

The annotated pieces can be used to create a wall display, which students can refer to during lessons to help them with their own work.
2. Mid-lesson

You can use exemplar work during the course of a lesson in a number of ways. Here are three of my favourites:

a. Move around the room and look at what students are writing. When you find a particularly good piece of work, read it out to the class and explain what makes it good. Indicate one or two things which other students in the class could emulate in their own work.

b. Alternatively, when you spot something particularly good, ask the student who has written it to share their work with another pupil who is struggling or who is uncertain about what they are doing.

c. When a student believes they have finished their work, ask them to compare it to an exemplar piece which is of a high standard. Indicate that they should identify three similarities and three differences between their work and the exemplar work. Explain that, once they have done this, they should improve their own work by making use of the differences they identified.

3. After marking

Having marked a class’ written work, you have a brilliant opportunity to improve everyone’s standard of writing.

Take the best piece of work in the class and create enough photocopies for students to work in pairs and have one copy between two. Also photocopy the mark scheme or success criteria which were used to assess the work.

Explain to the class that their task is to read through the work and mark it using the criteria. Point out that this is a high quality piece of work and that students should try to identify all the ways in which it meets the criteria. Ask each pair to annotate their copy of the work, using different coloured pens to indicate different parts of the mark scheme if possible.

Give between five and ten minutes for this part of the activity – the time will be determined by the length of the work and the complexity of the assessment criteria. When the time is up, lead a whole-class discussion on the relative merits of the exemplar. Appoint a scribe who can record the various points. These should then be typed up and turned into a hand-out for the whole class to keep and refer to in the future.

4. Assessment criteria

Every piece of writing that is marked is assessed in relation to a set of criteria. These could be formalised in a mark scheme or they could be held in the teacher’s mind as a result of their previous experience and study.

If students understand what the assessment criteria are and how they can be met, they will be far more likely to produce writing of the requisite standard.

Exemplar work can be used to highlight different aspects of assessment criteria. Here are three possible approaches:
a. Create a hand-out containing snippets from a number of exemplar pieces of work. Each should illustrate the successful meeting of one of the elements of the criteria.

b. The same as above, except with snippets of work that fail to meet the various assessment criteria. Use work from a previous year and keep it anonymous, for example, by typing it out.

c. Students work in groups of three. Each group is given a selection of exemplar work and a mark scheme. The task is to create a hand-out containing a series of examples of how the different criteria can be met. Scissors and glue will be required.

Ways into writing

1. Open tasks

Open tasks are those in which students are given guidelines by the teacher but then left to follow their own path. Here are some examples:

   a. “Red is better than blue”: Explain whether you agree or disagree with this statement.

   b. Develop a piece of writing based on the video and our discussion. You could do an essay, a speech, a diary entry, a report or a song.

   c. “And then everything changed…” Use this as the first line of your creative writing. Your story should be connected to the things we talked about during our discussion.

The way in which students can answer is left open, which means that they are able to write in a way and at a level with which they feel confident. In turn, this leads to increased motivation. When students feel more in control of their work, the quality of the work will improve.

One point worth noting is that open writing tasks should come after students have spent time engaging with a topic. If students do not have enough knowledge to call on, open tasks can be intimidating rather than empowering.

2. Discussion before writing

Speech is the mode of communication that most of us use most extensively. We speak every day and the things we say are instantly editable. If I say something and then do not like the sound of it, or if I feel that I have not conveyed my meaning correctly, I can simply speak again. Most of us are highly skilled at speaking, yet find writing more demanding.

Taking the time to discuss a topic before writing about it is therefore an excellent way into a piece of work. Talking something through helps us to understand and formalise what we think about it. Any mistakes made first in speech can be easily corrected. Students are already likely to be better at speaking than at writing. They will gain confidence through discussion and the quality of their written work will improve as a result.
Planning

1. The rationale

Writing is simpler and easier if the author plans their work in advance, but this is something that students are often sceptical about. It can be helpful to share a rationale for planning to help your class understand the benefits.

Explain the following:

a. If you do not know what you think about something, writing about it will be difficult. The process of planning requires that we reflect on our knowledge and understanding and consider how best to convey this through a piece of writing.

b. Having a plan means that we do not need to think so much about the structure of our work while we are writing. We have already done that thinking. The plan is a representation of it and allows us to focus all our attention on conveying ideas as clearly and precisely as possible.

c. Plans help to keep us on track and save us time. Rather than trying to work out exactly where we are in the context of the whole at any given time, we can simply check the plan and it will tell us the answer.

2. Individual planning

Here are three approaches to planning which students can use for almost any writing task:

a. Identify the key points you want to make and the order you want to make them in. Put this information into a list. This could be as brief as a series of single words, or the list could be detailed. As students write, they should tick each item off the list in turn.

c. Students work out how they want a piece of writing to end (perhaps even going so far as to write the end of their work first) and then plan backwards. This involves picking out the separate strands needed to reach the desired endpoint, which should then be listed and worked through one by one. This method is appropriate for fiction or non-fiction writing.

d. Students decide how much they are going to write, divide this into sections and then work out what they want to put in each section. Many pupils struggle to get started with their planning. They can feel uncertain about the choices they are being asked to make. This method has the benefit of beginning with easy decisions, thus leaving students better placed to make more taxing decisions regarding content.
3. Teacher-led planning

The following are ideas to help a teacher to lead students in developing plans:

a. One way of guiding students through the planning process is to model the whole thing for them. This could be done with a small group of students or with the whole class and involves the teacher talking students through the various steps of the process. This should be accompanied by a visual representation, either on the board or a piece of paper.

b. Break down the planning process into three steps and lead the class through them one at a time. For example, if students are going to write an essay, you could use the following three steps:
   - Deciding on an argument
   - Finding reasons and evidence to support the argument
   - Putting these into a logical order.

The teacher can introduce these one at a time and give students the opportunity to share and discuss their ideas at each stage.

c. If a piece of work is particularly complex, involves a type of writing which students have not previously encountered, or if some of your pupils struggle to access the work, then a planning pro-forma can be an effective tool. This usually consists of a sheet containing a series of boxes for students to fill in. Each of the boxes will refer to a different aspect of the work. When this is completed, students will be able to create their piece of writing by going through each section of the pro-forma and developing what they have put there.

Writing basics

1. SPS (Spelling, Punctuation, Sense)

I picked this self-assessment device up from my colleagues in the inclusion department at Pimlico Academy.

When students have finished a piece of written work, ask them to check it for SPS. This acronym refers to Spelling, Punctuation and Sense.

First, students should look carefully through their work and correct any spellings, indicating their corrections by writing “Sp” in the margin. Next, they should correct any punctuation errors, indicating these with a “P”. Finally, students should read the work through and check that it makes sense. Any changes should be marked with “Se”.

Only when the student has completed the SPS process should they share their work with the teacher.

The point is to get students to analyse their own work and improve it as a result. If we ask students to self-assess in this way, they will eventually start to do it automatically without being asked.
2. Key word displays

Displays containing key words and phrases act both as a prompt and as a memory bank for students to draw on during writing tasks. Attention can be directed towards them by use of verbal cues from the teacher.

However, one of the limitations of such displays is that they can quickly become part of the furniture. In this scenario, both teacher and students stop noticing the display and, as a result, stop referring to it.

To avoid this happening, try one of the following:

➤ Create a half-finished display and ask students to add to this each lesson.
➤ Create short activities based around the display, such as pointing to a word or phrase and challenging pupils to use it in a sentence.
➤ Appoint a student as “Display Master”. Each lesson this student will come up with ways for the display to be used and share these with the class when asked to do so.

3. Punctuation rules

The more familiar students are with the rules of punctuation, the easier they will find it to write effectively. Here are three ways you can help them to learn the rules:

a. Put up posters which show the punctuation rules. You might go for one big poster containing everything, or a series of smaller posters, one for each punctuation mark.

b. Create a set of punctuation cards. Each card should contain one punctuation symbol along with the rules which govern the use of that symbol. Photocopy the cards so that you have enough for the whole class (perhaps one set between four). Place these on desks and invite students to use them when they are doing a writing task.

c. Focus on a different punctuation rule each week, or each half-term (depending on how often you see your students). Talk to pupils about the rule, give them examples of how it works and encourage them to apply it in all their writing for a period of time you have specified.