SKILLS · WRITING

# TEACHING WRITING

Writing competence, approaches, sub-skills and feedback

AT A GLANCE

| | |
|---|---|
| **What it involves** | knowing what to say, who you are writing to and why, how the genre works, and the language and process to get there |
| **Teaching writing means** | helping learners analyse genres, follow a writing process and improve through feedback, not just setting a writing task |
| **Plan it with** | the **Task-Based Learning – Writing** and **Task–Teach–Task – Writing** frameworks |
| **Lesson ideas** | the **Writing sub-skills menu** in the appendix |

## Why writing is challenging

Unlike a speaker, a writer usually gets no immediate feedback. There is no listener to ask a question, look confused or react, so the writer must anticipate what the reader needs: whether the message is clear, well developed and has the right effect.

Writing also tends to be more carefully constructed than speech and follows **conventions** of content, organisation, language and layout. These conventions define a **genre**: a business email, an academic report, a social media post, an online review. Each genre has its own features, and learners need to know them to write effectively.

Good writers ask themselves questions like these.

| Area | The writer asks… |
|---|---|
| **Audience** | Who am I writing to? |
| **Purpose** | Why am I writing? What do I want to achieve? |
| **Content** | What information do I need to include? |
| **Organisation** | How should I order and lay out the information? |
| **Style** | How formal or informal should it be? |
| **Vocabulary** | Which words and expressions suit the topic and the reader? |
| **Grammar** | Which structures do I need? |
| **Coherence** | Do my ideas connect logically for the reader? |
| **Cohesion** | Do my sentences and paragraphs flow? |
| **Mechanics** | Are my spelling, punctuation and capitals correct? |
| **Process** | How will I plan, draft, review and edit? |

## From controlled to free writing

Not every writing activity develops writing skills. Sometimes learners write to practise grammar or vocabulary (**writing to learn**); at other times the aim is to produce a real text for a reader (**learning to write**). Both are useful, but only the second develops writing as a skill.

Writing activities also range from controlled to free. Lower levels may need more support, but all learners should eventually write texts with a real purpose and reader.

| Controlled | Guided | Free |
|---|---|---|
| Learners manipulate given language. | Learners write with a model, an outline or prompts. | Learners write their own text for a purpose and reader. |
| *e.g. sentence combining, gap-fills, rewriting sentences* | *e.g. completing a paragraph frame, answering prompts, following a model* | *e.g. a review, an email, a story, a report* |

## Approaches to writing

Approaches to writing traditionally focus on either the **product** (an accurate text, often based on a model) or the **process** (the steps writers take to produce it). Today, many teachers combine them in a **genre-process** approach (Badger & White 2000).

| | Product | Process | Genre-process |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Starting point** | a model text | learners' own ideas | a model text, then learners' own ideas |
| **Learners…** | analyse, practise and imitate features of the model | plan, draft, give each other feedback and redraft | analyse the genre, then plan, draft, review and redraft |
| **Strength** | clear awareness of genre conventions | good writing habits and learner involvement | combines both |
| **Risk** | copying the model; little thinking about content | ignoring genre conventions | takes more time |

The genre-process approach is the basis of the eltMate writing frameworks.

| Genre-process step | From | TBL – Writing framework stage |
|---|---|---|
| 1 The teacher presents a model of the genre. | **Product** | **Noticing** |
| 2 Learners analyse its features (content, organisation, language, style). | **Product** | **Noticing** |
| 3 Learners generate ideas and outline their text. | **Process** | **Task preparation \| First draft** |
| 4 Learners write a first draft. | **Process** | **Task preparation \| First draft** |
| 5 Learners give each other feedback on their drafts. | **Process** | **Interim review** |
| 6 Learners write a final draft, proofread it and publish it. | **Process** | **Writing task \| Final draft** |
| 7 Learners and teacher give feedback on the final texts. | **Both** | **Final review** |

In a **Task–Teach–Task – Writing** lesson, steps 1 and 2 move after the first draft: learners write first, and the genre analysis responds to what their drafts reveal.

## Analysing a genre

Genre analysis is a key step in the genre-process approach. A guided discovery task helps learners work out the features of a genre for themselves. Here, the genre is an **online restaurant review**.

LEARNER WORKSHEET

**1 Read the two online reviews and answer the questions.**

**A** Who are the writers writing to?

**B** Why are they writing?

**Amazing Saturday brunch**

★★★★★

We went for Saturday brunch and Noi was our chef. Everything she made was amazing. We asked for low-salt fried rice and it still tasted great. We really enjoyed this meal. We'll definitely be back!

**Overrated and overpriced**

★★☆☆☆

While the meat and fish were very good, the rest of the food was mediocre. The restaurant was extremely noisy, and the manager was unnecessarily pushy, trying to sell us the most expensive dishes on the menu. All in all, this restaurant is overrated and far too expensive. Stay away.

**2 Read the reviews again and answer the questions.**

**C** Can you find these parts in each review? *title > description of the experience > notable features > summary > recommendation*

**D** Are the parts in separate paragraphs?

**E** Which verb tense is used most? Why?

**F** What kind of adjectives do the writers use?

**G** Which expressions stand out? What are they used for?

**H** Is the language formal or informal?

ANSWER KEY

**A** other potential customers
**B** to share their experience and recommend the restaurant or warn people against it
**C** yes, although the parts are short and some are combined
**D** no: online reviews are usually short and written as one paragraph
**E** the past simple, to describe the experience; the present simple for the summary and opinion
**F** strong, evaluative adjectives (*amazing, mediocre, overrated*)
**G** e.g. *All in all* (to summarise), *Stay away* and *We'll definitely be back* (to recommend or warn)
**H** informal

**Comment** The questions raise awareness of audience (A), purpose (B), content and organisation (C, D), grammar (E), vocabulary (F, G) and style (H). Learners can then use these features in their own reviews, adapting them rather than copying them.

## The sub-skills at a glance

The questions writers ask can be broken down into **sub-skills** you can teach. They can be grouped in different ways; the table below shows one useful grouping. The appendix lists a range of sub-skills, each with a classroom activity idea.

| Area | What it covers | For example |
|---|---|---|
| **Mechanics** | spelling, punctuation and capitalisation | using correct punctuation |
| **Grammar and sentence structure** | accurate grammar and varied sentences | writing complex sentences |
| **Vocabulary** | range, precision, collocations and formality | choosing formal or informal words |
| **Purpose, audience and style** | writing for a reader and a purpose, with the right tone and conventions | adjusting tone to the reader |
| **Organisation and coherence** | paragraphs and the logical structure of the whole text | writing clear topic sentences |
| **Cohesion** | connecting sentences and paragraphs | using linking words, pronouns |
| **Academic writing** | sources, evidence, paraphrasing and summarising | paraphrasing without copying |
| **The writing process** | planning, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading | planning before writing |
| **Monitoring and reflection** | managing time, using feedback and tracking progress | using feedback to improve |

## Feedback and evaluation

### Accuracy and effectiveness

Writing can be evaluated for **accuracy** (is it free of errors?) and **effectiveness** (does it achieve its purpose?). Ideally, a text achieves both, but for language learners effectiveness often matters more. Imagine a letter of complaint with no errors but no demand for a refund, and another full of errors but with a clear, strong demand. Which is more likely to get the money back?

## Peer review

After the first draft, learners can give each other feedback using a checklist. Focus it on the aims of the lesson, so learners aren't overwhelmed by everything that could be corrected.

LEARNER WORKSHEET

**Read your partner's online review and write your suggestions.**

| Questions | Your suggestions |
|---|---|
| Does it include a title, a description of the experience, notable features, a summary and a recommendation? Are they in a logical order? | |
| Is the past simple used accurately? | |
| Could any adjectives be stronger or more precise? | |
| Could any expressions be improved? | |
| Is the style right for an online review: not too formal, not too informal? | |
| Any other suggestions? | |

The checklist reinforces the features of the genre analysed earlier. Writers then use their partner's suggestions to edit and improve their draft.

## Publishing

Once learners have written their final drafts, encourage them to **publish** them, for example on the classroom wall or a class blog, and give feedback on effectiveness. In a **gallery walk**, learners read each other's texts and answer a question such as *Which review is the most convincing? Why?* Learners can also **reply** to each other's texts, which gives their writing a real reader.

## Correcting written work

When you correct written work, you can choose between several strategies.

| Strategy | Advantage | Disadvantage |
|---|---|---|
| **Correct everything** | learners see every error | a page covered in red can be demotivating, and learners may not read the corrections |
| **Correct selectively** | focuses on the lesson aims and the most important errors | some errors go unaddressed |
| **Indicate errors with a code** | learners think about and correct their own errors | learners need to be trained to use the code |
| **Let learners find their own errors** | develops autonomy | learners can't correct what they don't know |

Many teachers combine strategies: they **indicate** errors selectively with a code, and learners correct them independently. These are common correction symbols.

| Symbol | Meaning | Symbol | Meaning |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Sp** | spelling | **WW** | wrong word |
| **WO** | word order | **{ }** | not necessary |
| **G** | grammar (general) | **M?** | meaning unclear |
| **V(t)** | verb tense | **P** | punctuation |
| **V(f)** | verb form | **F/I** | too formal or informal |
| **V(c)** | subject–verb agreement | **S/P** | singular or plural |
| **^** | something is missing | **C/U** | countable or uncountable |

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Encourage self-correction. Rewriting a sentence based on your feedback teaches learners more than reading a correct version you have written for them. For more feedback techniques, see the **Error Correction** handout.

## Making it work

### Give every task a purpose and a reader

Learners should know why they are writing and who they are writing to. A review that classmates will read and vote on is more motivating than “write a review for homework”.

### Analyse models, don’t just copy them

Use models to help learners notice genre features, then encourage them to adapt those features to their own ideas, rather than reproduce the model.

### Make time for the process

Allow enough class time for learners to plan, draft and review. If all the writing happens at home, learners miss the support and feedback that make the process useful.

### Write together

Collaborative writing, such as planning or drafting in pairs, generates discussion about language and lets learners learn from each other.

### Encourage writing outside class

Writing for pleasure, such as journals, messages or blogs, gives learners extra practice and helps build a writing habit.

## Common pitfalls

| Pitfall | What to do instead |
|---|---|
| **Writing is always set for homework, with no process in class.** | Do at least the planning and first draft in class, with support. |
| **Learners copy the model text.** | Analyse the model's features, then have learners apply them to their own ideas. |
| **Tasks have no reader or purpose.** | Give every task a reader and an outcome. |
| **Feedback covers every error.** | Correct selectively, in line with the lesson aims. |
| **Only accuracy is assessed.** | Assess effectiveness too: does the text achieve its purpose? |
| **Learners never see their feedback again.** | Build in time to redraft using the feedback. |

ONLINE CLASSES

Shared documents are ideal for writing lessons: learners can draft together, and you can follow their work in real time. Use comments and suggestion mode for peer review, and version history to compare first and final drafts. Online classes are also a good chance to practise digital genres such as emails, messages and posts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Writers have no immediate feedback from the reader, so they need to anticipate the reader's needs.
- Genres have their own conventions, and learners need to analyse them.
- The genre-process approach combines analysing a model with a real writing process, and is the basis of the eltMate writing frameworks.
- Give every task a purpose and a reader, and evaluate effectiveness as well as accuracy.
- Correct selectively and encourage learners to correct and redraft their own work.

WHERE NEXT

**Task-Based Learning – Writing (framework)** planning a genre-process writing lesson

**Task–Teach–Task – Writing (framework)** a writing lesson that responds to learners' first drafts

**Guided Discovery** designing genre analysis tasks

**Error Correction** feedback techniques

**Practice Activities** controlled, meaningful and communicative practice

## Further reading

Badger, R. & White, G. (2000). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54(2), 153–160.

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# Appendix · Writing sub-skills menu

Use this menu to choose a sub-skill focus for a lesson and to find an activity idea. Each activity can be adapted to almost any genre or topic.

## Mechanics

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Using correct spelling** | Personal spelling log: learners list their own frequent misspellings and test a partner on them. |
| **Using correct punctuation** | Give learners a paragraph with no punctuation; they add it, then compare with the original. |
| **Using correct capitalisation** | Find the ten missing capital letters in a short email. |

## Grammar and sentence structure

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Putting words in the right order** | Unjumble sentences taken from the model text. |
| **Using verb tenses correctly** | Highlight the tenses in a model text and explain why each one is used. |
| **Making subjects and verbs agree** | Error hunt: find five agreement errors in a short text. |
| **Making nouns and pronouns agree** | Replace repeated nouns in a paragraph with the correct pronouns. |
| **Using articles correctly** | Remove all the articles from a paragraph; learners put them back. |
| **Using prepositions correctly** | Gap-fill made from preposition errors in learners' own drafts. |
| **Writing simple, compound and complex sentences** | Sentence combining: join short sentences with *and, but, because, which* or *although*. |
| **Varying sentence structure** | Rewrite a paragraph made only of simple sentences so that it reads better. |

## Vocabulary

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Using topic-related vocabulary** | Build a mind map of topic vocabulary before writing. |
| **Using collocations** | Collocation hunt: find and record five collocations in a model text. |
| **Using fixed and semi-fixed phrases** | Build a phrase bank for the genre (*I am writing to..., All in all...*). |
| **Using idioms** | Decide which idioms suit an informal message and which would be out of place in a formal one. |
| **Choosing formal or informal words** | Formality swap: rewrite informal sentences in a formal register, and vice versa. |
| **Using a wider range of vocabulary** | "Upgrade it": replace overused words (*good, nice, big*) with more precise ones. |

## Purpose, audience and style

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Writing for a specific audience** | Write the same message to two readers, such as a friend and a manager, and compare. |
| **Writing with a clear purpose** | Before writing, state your purpose in one sentence. |
| **Using appropriate tone and style** | Rank three versions of the same email from least to most polite. |
| **Using cautious language to soften claims** | Soften strong statements (*This is the best → This may be one of the best*). |
| **Following layout and genre conventions** | Match openings, closings and layouts to different genres (email, review, report). |
| **Writing for digital formats** | Turn a formal email into a short message or post, and discuss what changes. |

## Organisation and coherence

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Structuring the whole text logically** | Put the jumbled paragraphs of a model text in order. |
| **Writing effective paragraphs** | Sort a set of sentences into paragraphs. |
| **Writing clear topic sentences** | Match topic sentences to paragraphs, or write the missing one. |
| **Writing clear supporting sentences** | Add two supporting details to each of three topic sentences. |
| **Writing clear concluding sentences** | Choose the best concluding sentence for a paragraph from three options. |

## Cohesion

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Using linking and transition words** | Complete a text with linkers, then use three of them in your own text. |
| **Avoiding repetition with pronouns and substitution** | Draw arrows from pronouns (*it, they, this*) to what they refer to. |
| **Repeating key words to keep a text connected** | Highlight the chains of key words and synonyms in a model text. |

## Academic writing (for learners who need it)

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Including and citing sources** | Match in-text citations to the entries in a reference list. |
| **Choosing and presenting evidence** | Rank pieces of evidence for an argument from strongest to weakest. |
| **Paraphrasing without copying** | Paraphrase a sentence, then compare versions and check none copies the original. |
| **Summarising effectively** | Summarise a paragraph in exactly 20 words. |

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Avoiding plagiarism** | Spot which versions of a source sentence count as plagiarism. |

## The writing process

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Planning before writing** | Brainstorm and outline using a simple planning frame. |
| **Drafting** | Timed first draft: focus on getting ideas down, not on accuracy. |
| **Revising content and organisation** | Peer review that focuses only on content and order. |
| **Editing for language and flow** | Read a draft aloud to a partner to spot sentences that don't flow. |
| **Proofreading for errors** | Focused proofreading: check one thing at a time (verbs, then spelling, then punctuation). |

## Monitoring and reflection

| Sub-skill | Activity idea |
|---|---|
| **Managing time while writing** | Timed writing in stages: 5 minutes to plan, 15 to write, 5 to check. |
| **Using feedback to improve** | Learners correct their own errors using a correction code. |
| **Reflecting on your own writing** | Compare first and final drafts and note two things that improved. |
| **Tracking progress over time** | Keep a writing portfolio and review it every few weeks. |

*Ideas from: Hyland (2003); Harmer (2004)*