



Necessary Foundations for Writing

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COMPOSING

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- Symbolic Function
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ENCODING

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COMPOSING

Image of Self as Writer

A strong learner identity is essential for successful, life-long learning. At *Lisa Burman Consultants*, we frame our pedagogy for writing from an identity perspective and begin there. Without a commitment to building strong identities as writers, our teaching risks creating an alliterate generation – those who can perform the mechanics of literacy but do not see its purpose in their lives.

Feeling a sense of agency is essential for well-being and deep, engaged learning. We advocate for approaches that celebrate a child's agency as a writer so they develop an "I can do this!" attitude towards communicating through written words and images.

Our approach to the teaching of writing (through a Writing Workshop – Bookmaking & Writer's Notebooks – Approach) is concerned with developing and honouring strong learning dispositions such as confidence, curiosity, resourcefulness, communication, purposefulness and persistence. These learning dispositions place the child in a situation where they are 'ready, willing and able' (Claxton & Carr, 2004) to engage in the writing process.

Some of the ways we advocate for a strong image of self as a writer include:

- A belief that every child is capable of growing as writer, no matter their starting place.
- The author's right to choose topics and genres that are meaningful to them.

- A focus on the thinking of a writer to empower agency, purposefulness, resourcefulness and persistence.
- A writing culture that empowers novice writers to make intentional decisions about their writing and to take action that enhances the experience of their reader.
- Writing conferences that nudge young writers to take action whilst always honouring that the author is in control of his/her own writing process and product.
- Building confidence and risk-taking as a writer by providing multiple entry-points and open, inclusive teaching practices that enable differentiation.
- Teaching with mentor texts that create and nurture a curiosity about texts, words, images and their impact on the reader.

Language

Writing begins with thought – an idea that the writer wishes to communicate. Vygotsky (*Thought & Language*, 1962) believed that language helps form thought and is not merely a vehicle for communication. Thought and language, therefore, can be viewed as possessing a tightly interdependent and reciprocal relationship.



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One function of language is to transform thought from one mind to another. Therefore, language is essential for communicating in the written form (images and words). The writer can use both a language of words and a language of images to communicate.

The acquisition of language(s) is the foundation for being a writer. Whilst oral language most definitely supports the novice writer in communicating their ideas, internal language is also of great importance. Internal language plays a role in a writer's self-regulation and metacognitive thinking. A language-rich environment is essential for the development of both internal and external language.

A language rich environment that supports novice writers includes:

- Many opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations with peers and adults.
- Many opportunities for social play and learning, providing the authentic purpose to use language for communication.
- Child initiated and directed play-scripts.
- Story Tables
- Small World Play
- Thinking aloud by peers and adults – making internal language/thought visible.
- Daily opportunities to sing, chant, play and read.
- Daily Read Alouds with high quality literature.

Mark-Making

Mark-making is a term used for the creation of lines, patterns, textures, shapes and all kinds of marks. It expands the term 'drawing' to include mark-making with a variety of tools and on a variety of surfaces.

Providing many opportunities for children to make marks helps them see the power in their agency: "I can make a mark". Not all mark-making will be representational – sometimes the satisfaction comes from the joy of the process rather than what the marks represent. All of these experiences develop the identity and conceptual knowledge required to be a writer.

When a child's mark-making is representational, s/he understands the purpose for communicating in a written mode (marks and images). They feel the satisfaction of communicating an idea – sharing a thought – with another. This is at the heart of being a writer – the notion that "I can have an idea. I can communicate it through marks, drawing and words (verbal initially) and it is satisfying to me and to my

audience (reader)".

Frequent experiences with mark-making also develop the muscle control, purposefulness and self-regulation needed to be a writer.

We advocate for:

- Daily opportunities for mark-making that are purposeful and driven by the child: easel painting, drawing with a variety of materials, mark-making with sticks in the sand or mud, painting with water on walls and paths outside, for example.
- Great value given to children's drawing in bookmaking as a form of written communication.
- Drawing seen as a valid planning tool in the writing process.

Motor Development

Mark-making opportunities alone are insufficient to develop the motor control, proprioceptive and vestibular development needed for writing. These need movement to develop and are *essential* foundations for writing. We advocate for learning environments that provide ample time, space and opportunity for children to move throughout the day, particularly during early childhood (B-8), so that the following are developed:

A strong core, upper body and hand strength in order to hold a writing tool (pencil, crayon or texta) accurately and use it with ease and control.

Proprioceptive sense to inform the correct amount of pressure to apply on the page for mark-making.

Eye muscles to support the near-vision task of mark-making, as well as to refocus between two objects, such as paper and a word/letter resource.

Vestibular sense for attention, balance, eye control, postural strength and the ability to be still (for developmentally appropriate amounts of time).

Auditory system in order to distinguish between sounds in speech (phonological awareness).

An abundance of movement throughout childhood supports children's motor development and therefore, their readiness for mark-making and writing.

(With thanks to Clare Crew of [Thriving Children](#) for this insight.)

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Symbolic Function

Symbolic functioning is a conceptual understanding that is *essential* for print-based literacies. It refers to our ability to embody one thing with the power to represent another and it begins in play. When children pretend a stone is a car or a bird or a cupcake, they are using object transformation and through this, develop the concept of symbol. This means they can later understand that images (such as illustrations in a picture book or photographs) are representing (symbolising) the real thing. Eventually, this symbolic functioning supports the child to connect squiggly lines (groups of letters) to the meaning of a word to represent something. Without symbolic functioning, we wouldn't understand the alphabetic principle.

We advocate for daily opportunities for children to develop symbolic functioning through:

- Time and space for imaginative play, indoors, outdoors, alone and with others.
- Play props that can be transformed into multiple ideas rather than restricting the child's play (eg: a length of fabric can symbolise a snake, hair, a sling, a cape, a picnic rug, a blanket, whilst a princess costume can only really be a princess costume.)
- Child's agency in determining how, when and where to use play props.
- Child initiated and directed imaginative play scripts.
- Story Tables with familiar books.
- Small world play contexts that tap into children's interests.

Concepts about Print

Young writers need to understand the purpose for engaging in the act of writing, no matter what this might look like in early childhood. Why would you choose to engage in something that fulfilled no purpose and wasn't that enjoyable? Concepts about print are developed through engaging, joyful experiences with many different texts for a variety of purposes. Children engage with print firstly through authentic and meaningful mark-making & reading in play, through Story Tables, Read Alouds, Shared Reading, daily opportunities to read authentic, high quality literature and through methodologies such as Modelled & Shared Writing.

These concepts about print are *not* a pre-requisite to being a writer, but develop *through* writing, mark-making and reading. They are conceptual understandings that enable children to continue

their growth as a writer and include:

- Print fulfils many purposes – for entertainment, to help us remember, to communicate to others, to help us follow directions, etc.
- Print conveys a consistent message over time.
- Print is read for meaning. What is read needs to make sense.



Necessary Foundations for Writing

ENCODING

Writing is more than spelling, but once children are in Primary School, this also becomes a learning focus. We advocate for learning to spell to be tightly connected to the purpose for writing. Accurate/conventional spelling helps the reader to read your writing easily. Approximated spelling is valued and encouraged from an early age. Initially, a child's approximated spelling may loosely resemble letter shapes and hold no letter-sound correspondence. It is highly valued and honoured for what it reveals about a child's literacy understandings.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological Awareness is the ability to focus on the sounds within oral language and includes the ability to distinguish rhythm, rhyme, discrete phonemes (sounds) and syllables. It is developmental and is often learnt **through** engagement with rich language contexts that hold meaning for the child. Phonemic awareness is only one aspect of phonological awareness. We advocate for intentional teaching through engaging, playful and meaningful contexts rather than isolated drilling of phonological awareness components.

- Daily singing, rhyming, finger plays and poems where children engage with rhythm, rhyme and alliteration.
- Literature for Story Tables, Shared Reading and Read Alouds chosen for their use of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and playfulness with language (as well as for other reasons).
- Transition Games that engage children in playing with words through rhyme, alliteration, syllables, and blending and segmenting phonemes (often using their names – the most important word to them).
- Modelling of how phonological awareness helps you as a speller through Modelled and Interactive Writing.

Alphabetic Principle

The Alphabetic Principle builds on the strong symbolic functioning developed through play; the symbol system to be learnt is the alphabet. Building phonic knowledge (sound-letter correspondence) is essential for spelling. We use it when problem solving the spelling of unknown words. However, it is only one strategy we use for spelling. We advocate for it to be taught alongside other spelling strategies, not

before or in place of them. Phonics is not a complete writing or spelling programme – it is only part of it.

Children who find spelling a challenging task often have only one strategy to use when they want to write unfamiliar words. They often over-rely on 'sounding out' (Daffern, 2017). We advocate approaches that explicitly teach and build phonic knowledge (phonology) alongside other spelling knowledges (orthography, morphology, and etymology).

Ways to intentionally teach phonics within meaningful contexts for children include:

- Engage in a Name Inquiry – investigating, grouping, looking for patterns in the names of the group. To explicitly teach phonics, group names according to initial or final letters, or vowels. Explore the different sounds those letters may make in each name. Or group names according to initial, final or medial sounds and record the letters that make these sounds.
- Harvest words from familiar Big Books and Poems used in Shared Reading and investigate the sound-letter relationships as above.
- Regularly use Modelled Writing: thinking aloud explicitly about the choices you make for spelling and modelling a variety of spelling strategies, including phonics.
- Regularly use Interactive Writing, where the teacher and child/ren 'share the pen', children writing what is in their zone of proximal development (eg: initial sound-letter correspondence, high frequency words or vowel choice). This is most effective in small groups, but can be used with larger groups when children can also write on individual whiteboards and remain engaged.
- Play word and letter games with familiar Shared Reading texts. After reading, search for words that contain particular letters and match these with the sound made in that word.
- Play word-building games with magnetic letters (eg: onset-rime; base word and affix)
- Teach, scaffold and model how to use phonic knowledge when writing (in Mini Lessons and Conferences)
- Scaffold children's use of a *variety* of spelling strategies during writing times and in particular in Writing Conferences.