

How schools can ignite children's passion for writing



There are many ways schools can help children develop a deep enjoyment of writing which will also boost their progress across the curriculum, says Kathy Ewers, Education Adviser at Juniper Education.

As primary school places are allocated and teachers prepare for the coming academic year, the ripples from Covid-related learning gaps will continue to impact the achievement of children returning through the school gates in September.

Much emphasis has been placed on the importance of effective catch-up strategies for subjects such as maths and literacy to reduce the negative effect of the pandemic. But according to a [report](#) published recently by Juniper Education, the subject that appears to have been hit hardest by disruptions to learning over the last couple of years is writing.

The report compared primary school attainment data between 2019 and 2021 at several key points and found that all year groups saw bigger drops in writing than in

any other subject. Overall, the figures highlighted a 13 percentage point drop in the number of primary school pupils working at age-related expectations in writing, down from 73% in autumn 2019 to 60% just two years later.

The most significant fallback was shown to be in year 3, where only 58% of children were working where they should be for their age in writing. Back in 2019, 79% of pupils were achieving as expected – that's a staggering 21 percentage point drop. Data for disadvantaged pupils was

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even more concerning, with fewer than half (45%) of all primary aged children working at or above age-related expectations in writing, falling from 61% in 2019.

These figures reflect what many senior leaders and teachers are seeing in their own schools and addressing learning gaps, including those in writing, will continue to be a priority as the new cohort of pupils are welcomed back into the classroom after the summer.

Strengthening children's writing

One of the key challenges for primary schools is that their current group of year 3 children have not experienced a single academic year of uninterrupted learning since Reception. Younger children are therefore at much higher risk of falling behind as they move through the critical primary years.

While activities such as story times, reading and responding to texts, and playing number games worked well with the routine of learning at home in lockdown, many children had far fewer opportunities to develop their physical writing skills. This could continue to hold them back in the months and years ahead.

Hardly a day goes by in any classroom where children won't be asked to write something in the traditional way, using a pen and paper, so it is vital that schools prioritise effective techniques to help children catch-up with and develop their writing skills, alongside subjects such as reading and maths, so that no child falls short of achieving their full potential.

The key areas where children will benefit from targeted interventions to help strengthen their writing skills include:

Stamina – increase children's ability to complete long written tasks, such as story-writing

Motivation – bringing back the joy of writing so that pupils are motivated and engaged

Fine motor skills – help pupils improve their fine motor control to ensure their handwriting is legible and fluent.

Children who may not have done a great deal of writing in the last two years need to be encouraged to see that it does not have to be a daunting task. Below are some suggestions to help you ensure your pupils become confident, fluent and happy writers.

Make written activities fun

If you ask a class to produce a long piece of writing, this might be overwhelming for some children. But there are ways to help make the task more fun and less arduous.

Lists help children to warm up their writing skills at the beginning of a lesson. Whether you ask them to create a to-do list, name as many African mammals as they can or write down all the colours they have worn that week, it will be a worthwhile exercise in terms of strengthening their written work. They are likely to enjoy doing it too.



Another idea is to ask them to write a list of different topics, from football to food or even famous people. They can then cut out each topic they've created and put it into a hat. Each week, you can get your pupils to select two topics and decide which one they want to write about.

You could turn a written activity into a timed task shaped around a theme they enjoy writing about too. Give pupils one minute to write as much as they can about puppies, their favourite toy or the best holiday they ever had, for example. This will encourage them to have a go and they will probably not even notice that they are building their writing stamina at the same time.

The true enjoyment of creative writing comes from a child's imagination so activities that give them

opportunities to make up words and phrases often go down really well. Give the children a list of invented words and task them with writing an origin story for each word. You could even give out a weekly prize for the most imaginative or funny explanation of an invented word.

A really effective approach that will challenge children in a fun way is to choose a topic they have recently learned and ask them to write about it from an alternative perspective. So, if you've been teaching the Celts, ask them to imagine they are a Celtic roundhouse and get them to write about the conversations and situations they would see happening to the family who lives there.

Look at interesting ways to inspire creative writers

Inspiration doesn't come easily to some children so finding ways to help your pupils to come up with new ideas as part of a creative writing task can make a real difference.

Objects can be a powerful way to get the creative juices flowing for a story. You might bring in an old piece of clothing, a game from your childhood or an unusually coloured stone. Then ask the children to write about whom they imagine the object belonged to or its journey to its current destination. You can spark their imaginations about the object's history or how it might have been used in the past. The pupils may even want to imagine other objects they could tie into the theme and include in their stories.



As some children prefer to write non-fiction texts, it's worthwhile giving them this as an option wherever possible. For example, if you have shown the children a conker, ask them to write a description of the tree it came from, the animals that live in the forest where it grows and what happens after the conker falls to the ground.

Provide more opportunities for children to write

When children have a good understanding of why they are writing and who they are writing for, they have a clearer sense of purpose and this makes the exercise much more motivating. It's a good idea to spend time talking about the different audiences pupils might write for. This will give you the chance to explain how the style of writing and language used would differ depending on whether they are writing a postcard to grandma or a poem for the local journal in celebration of the queen's platinum jubilee.

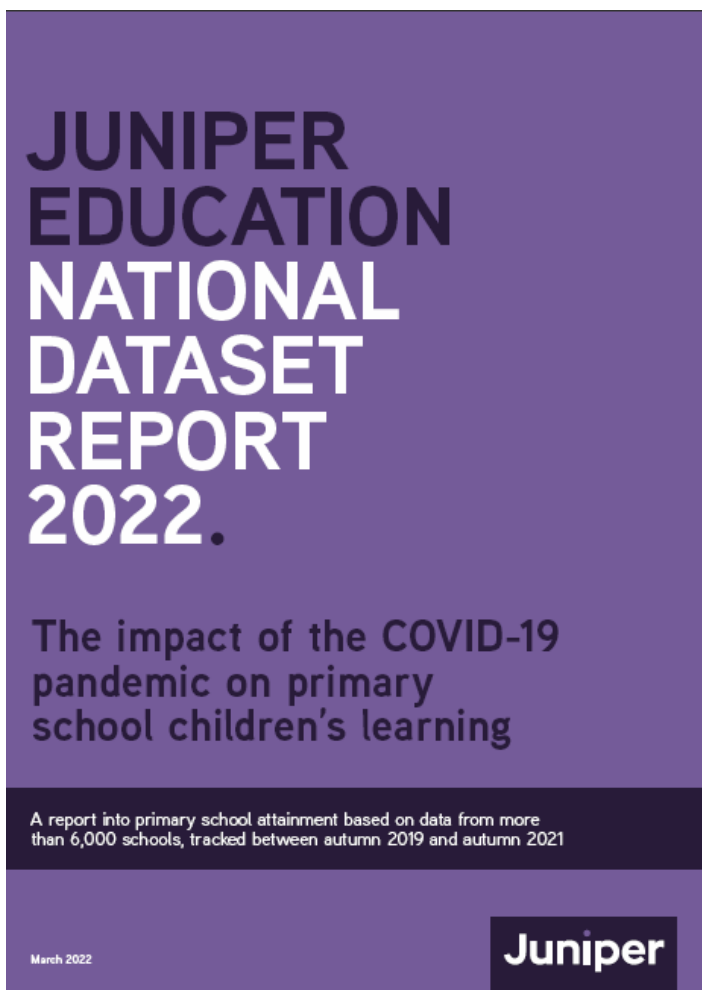
Whenever possible, devise tasks which have a genuine purpose and audience, such as letter writing. Many pupils have been encouraged to write to their local council, MP and even the prime minister to express their views on key local issues such as a lack of school places or broader global challenges like climate change. Giving children a controversial writing task in which they are able to express their feelings while writing for different audiences is a great way to build their skills.

One example you could start with is to ask the children to imagine their local swimming pool was set to close. Then get them to explore their views on everything from the cost of maintaining the facility to ticket prices, the availability of public transport or fundraising ideas for keeping it open.

They could then be asked to write a formal letter to the local council expressing their concerns, an email to a friend and a newspaper report outlining the issues behind the proposed closure of the pool.

An activity like this would fit well with what you are already teaching in Key Stage 2 and should encourage some really interesting written content.

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Click on the image to download the report

Celebrate all forms of writing

Keen readers will often make good writers, so exposing children to as much written content as possible will also feed into their writing. Some of your pupils may not have done as much reading as usual during lockdowns, others may have done more. Children don't often consider themselves to be readers if they haven't spent much time reading books, but you can help open their eyes to how much reading they have done in other ways, whether that was reading recipes, game instructions or subtitles on the television.

The children might be doing more writing than they realise too. Ask them to make a list of all the writing they have done in the last 24 hours, for example texting, messaging or typing web addresses.

You might want to introduce a thought-provoking subject for pupils and get them to write a persuasive newspaper article on the theme.

It's well worth sharing a range of examples of effective writing in different formats, from poems and comics to press articles, blogs and screenplays. This will help you ensure children experience a wide range of texts in a variety of formats, which include both physical books and digital content.

Exposing children to authentic publications and presentations across different platforms enables them to see how the authors engage their audiences according to the format and this is a useful way to help them shape and develop their own writing ideas.

Create ideas for discussion

Some children find it difficult to decide what to write about so providing them with some ideas is a great way to get them started. Contrasting themes which they have strong views on will help. Give the pupils some topics to debate in their writing and then see how many children agree or disagree with the opinions. Good examples are 'football is a better game than cricket', or 'you can choose one super power to help others – strength or invisibility – choose one and explain why.'

You might want to introduce a thought-provoking subject for pupils and get them to write a persuasive newspaper article on the theme. Ideas such as 'the summer holidays should be longer', 'global warming is the world's biggest problem' or 'how countries should work together to end hunger or prevent war' work well.

When children see writing as a creative and enjoyable activity and understand the importance of crafting a good message, presenting a persuasive argument or producing an exciting story, they are much more likely to find joy in writing.

Having been encouraged to explore their own authentic voices in their creative writing, children will be more likely to have increased engagement in other areas of the curriculum and get a much deeper learning experience as a result.



Kathy Ewers advises subject leaders in primary English teaching as well as being an experienced KS1 and KS2 moderator and an accredited trainer in effective literacy intervention.

For more information on teaching and learning in primary schools, visit <https://junipereducation.org/>.