

Writing for thinking

John Collins shows how to set low-risk writing tasks to develop pupils thinking and build their confidence in writing. Introduction by **Steve Williams**

In the UK, writing instruction is now mostly conceived as preparing students to write in certain genres and for specified 'audiences'. A particular focus in primary schools has been to prepare pupils for Sats tests by increasing their use of expressions that carry weight in the mark schemes.

Using writing as an aid for thinking – as a means to organise, remember or even discover one's own thoughts – does not seem to be seen as a priority. It is true that teachers often use MindMaps, Venn diagrams, cause-and-effect tables and other means of arranging writing on a page, but these 'visual tools for thinking' are often considered as being separate from writing as if they inhabit a different sphere of cognition altogether.

In America, many initiatives retain a link between thinking and writing



and try to make the most of the relationship between the two. One of these is *The Collins Writing Program*. John Collins, the author, has, for practical purposes, stipulated five types of writing for teachers to set pupils. The first two types lead to writing for thinking, organising and remembering; the last three involve progressively more editing and aim pupils towards better expression and, eventually, publication. Types 3–5 use the techniques of reading composed text aloud (with or without partners) and checking for prescribed ‘correction areas’. In an argumentative piece of work, a correction area might be: ‘should have a clear statement of opinion’ and ‘two or three compelling reasons’. Writing at this end of the continuum tends towards writing for expression and correctness. It is familiar territory for teachers in the UK.

The rest of this article is an extract on Type One Writing from John Collins’s book *Improving Student Performance Through Writing Across the Curriculum*. It seems to me that a great benefit of this type of writing is that it can be used by teachers as material with which to start exploring, through shared writing, different forms of expressing connections such as *cause/effect* and *principle/example*. These connections are essential for both writing and thinking but certain limited forms of expressing connections are often forced to students in the name of ‘the explicit teaching of writing’ (See my article: *Connectivitis and its remedies* in *Teaching Thinking and Creativity*, Issue 25). Integrating thinking, writing, talking and learning and through setting plenty of Type One writing is, perhaps, a step on the road to recovery.

Type One Writing

Definition: *Type One writing is writing to get ideas on paper, brainstorming. It is the idea-generating, recollecting, data-gathering, exploring, or questioning phase of the writing and thinking process. Type One writing is timed and requires a minimum number of items or lines, a quota. Questions and/or guesses are permitted. Evaluated with a check (✓) or minus (–).*

Type One writing is the perfect response to the question, how do we get students to write more without overwhelming the teacher? It’s a way to make writing a natural occurrence. In her book *The Nine Rights of Every Writer*, Vicki Spandel has the ‘right to write badly’ as one of her nine rights. She goes on to say,

In many classrooms, writing is an event: *Time for writing!* The more we adopt this approach, the more unnatural we make writing feel – and the more pressure we put

on students to make every writing act a performance to remember ... Our students will be stronger, better writers when it feels as natural to write in school as it feels to read, and when it is as integral to learning in all subjects’. (p. 71).

Of course a conscientious teacher may ask if frequent, ungraded writing makes any real difference in the quality of students’ writing. Professional writers have long advocated free writing as a critical technique, and in a carefully designed study published in *Education and Treatment of Children*, Kasper-Ferguson and Moxley found that timed free writing periods dramatically improved the quality of student writing in the fourth grade. Their results showed ‘an examination of writing samples over time from students with the highest and lowest writing rates showed improved writing quality in terms of more concrete details and more sophisticated organization’ (p. 249). It’s powerful when conventional wisdom and carefully designed research studies complement one another.

Most Type One writing assignments are completed in class in less than ten minutes and are a great way to overcome writer’s block. Typically they follow the rules of brainstorming by requiring students to write a specified amount in a specified time. Unlike brainstorming, Type One writing is usually done individually and many times without benefit of a class discussion. An important objective of Type One writing is to give everyone time to think about a topic. It can also quiet down highly verbal students (the 20 percent who do 80 percent of the talking) and provide teachers with a sense of how much students know about a particular area or topic. *Type One writing assignments commonly replace or precede classroom discussion*. For example, one of the most effective uses of this type of writing is at the beginning of a unit. Rather than introducing the unit with a lecture or asking a class of students to tell what they know about the unit, a teacher asks all students to write a specified number of lines about everything they know about the topic. ‘If you do not know much or, for that matter, anything about the topic, write questions.’

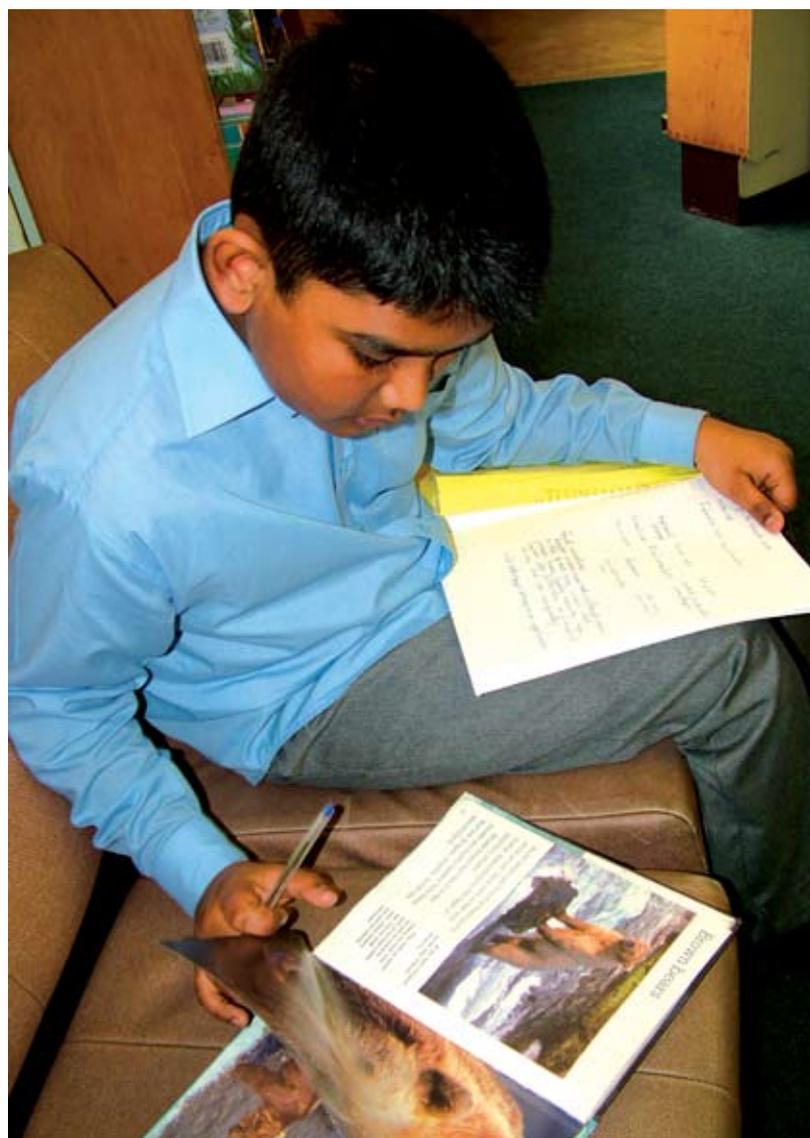
I sometimes follow Type One assignments with an activity that asks a few individual students to read their papers while the class categorizes the ideas into three columns: facts about the topic, questions about the topic, and miscellaneous. While one student reads, the others listen and tell me where to list what was just read. Students must be active listeners to categorize and evaluate the ideas being read. It’s a wonderful way to start any lesson, does not require at-home preparation, and gets students talking, listening, and thinking about a topic they will be studying.

Format for Type One Writing: Type One writing requires just one draft. Students only need to put their names on the first line, right-hand side, and 'Type One' on the first line, left-hand side of their papers, and remember to skip lines. Masters with the correct format for the different types of writing are at the back of this book. You may find it helpful to copy some of these pages until the students have the proper format mastered.

Form: Type One writing can take almost any form, but it is often a list, rambling essay, or personal reflection. Some teachers call it a learning log or response journal but because of the quota and time limit, it tends to be more structured than the traditional log or journal. Type One writing can even take the form of a graphic organizer or chart where students display information in a graphic form. It can mix facts and questions. While the most obvious Type One assignments respond to directions like, 'Tell me everything you know about a particular topic, or predict what will happen if . . . ,' a more interesting use of Type One writing asks students to write in an imaginative/narrative style – writing to tell a story – rather than in an analytical/expository style – writing to explain or prove to a teacher that the student knows something. For example, a social studies teacher might ask students to write fifteen to twenty lines of dialogue between two historical figures who have met in the afterlife and are sharing thoughts and experiences. The important thing to remember is that these pieces do not have to be polished – they just have to be attempted.

Audience: The only audience for Type One writing is the student writer. The teacher plays the role of a quick evaluator who does not carefully read the paper but checks to see if the amount of writing required was generated and that the student attempts to interact with the topic. Teachers typically will skim a sample of Type Ones from a class to get a sense of the classes' prior knowledge in relationship to a new unit.

Evaluation: The only evaluation criterion for Type One writing is that each student must write something in an atmosphere of either no risk or relatively no risk. For students who are not very fluent writers or who need a concrete goal, the sole criterion is the number of written lines, written within a time limit. It is important to use number of written lines rather than sentences. A teacher who requires sentences must read and correct sentence structure, and that is not the purpose of Type One writing. For example, the teacher gives the assignment,



'Write ten lines telling what you know about Siberia, and if you cannot think of ten lines of information, list questions.' Then the teacher can evaluate the assignment by simply looking at the length and need not read it to see if it was in sentences. The objective is to help students discover what they know, not to see if their writing is in complete sentences.

TIP

My favorite follow-up to a Type One writing assignment is the below-the-line activity. In this activity, the students draw a line across the paper where the Type One writing has ended. They then partner up with another student and share each other's writing, adding a specified number of additional written lines 'below the line,' thus adding to their original list. I find that asking students to 'add three additional lines of information or questions that you did not have on your original list' focuses the discussions and makes the students more accountable than just asking students to share.

Sample Type One Writing Questions

Type One writing gets ideas on paper – brainstorming. Type One is timed and requires a minimum number of items or lines. Questions and/or guesses are permitted. Evaluated with a check (✓) or minus (−).

For activating prior knowledge

- In eight* lines or more (or five or ten lines depending on the time you want to take), write the things you know or questions you have about _____.
- Even though we have not read or discussed it yet, what does the term (or concept or phrase) _____ mean to you? Fill at least four* lines.

For reflecting about learning

- What were the most important (or interesting, surprising) points to you from yesterday's discussion about ____? Fill six lines or more. (To enhance the brainstorming aspects of this Type One prompt, establish a quota of writing and time limit appropriate for the task.)
- Now that we have finished our unit on _____, make a list of at least ten* terms that would appear in a book chapter on this topic.
- Write at least four* examples of _____.
- What are three* ways we can get the same (result, solution, answer, outcome)?

For predicting

- In five* lines, predict what would happen if _____. Explain why you think so.
- In five* lines, describe what might have caused the scene you see in this picture.

For making connections

How do you think _____ and _____ are related? Fill five* lines or more.

- How is _____ (this type of problem, concept) similar to _____ (another type of problem, concept)? Fill seven lines or more.

A short interview with John J. Collins

Steve Williams: Do you think that writing is underused as a tool for thinking in schools?

John Collins: First, I would like to separate your question into two parts. Without doubt, writing is underutilized as a thinking tool – especially in classrooms where whole-class or small group discussions provide the major opportunity for thinking. The problem is that these discussions are usually dominated by the highly verbal, glib students, and the more introverted and thoughtful students rarely get a chance to speak. Having all students write, especially when the writing is low risk, (Type One writing) should precede, not replace discussion. Writing slows down the thinking process which is usually beneficial. When we write, we become more reflective, have time to consider the question, and have the time to craft more complex responses. I did my doctoral work on problem solving. One of my findings was that written solutions to complex problems were always better than verbal solutions.

The second part of your question – about graphic organizers is also interesting. In the United States most students are very familiar with graphic organizers (Venn diagrams, webs, etc.), but I find that the students use them only when directed by the teacher, and usually, as part of a formal writing project that will end in a multiple draft composition. Rather than occasional, formal use, we need to ask students to use graphic organizers on a regular basis (many times a week) so that their use becomes habitual. Type One or Type Two writing assignments are perfect to help achieve this goal. Students can be held accountable, but teachers do not have to ‘correct’ them the way they would for a composition.

SW: Has the ‘Five Types of Writing’ approach been used successfully with all age groups?

JC: Yes, we work in kindergarten through graduate level using the Five Types of writing. The framework works well at any level which makes it so popular in school systems. We have even introduced the program to a group of physicians who evaluate hospitals. The doctors found the distinctions among the Five Types of writing helpful when creating internal documents. Before the training, they critiqued every written word as if it were a final draft, when many times the author simply wanted to share ideas. It gave the practice a way to share expectations about written documents and made them more productive.

SW: A significant feature of the program is reading aloud for editing. Is there evidence that this is an effective practice for improving writing?

JC: Reading Types Three through Type Five out loud to yourself (Type Three) and having your paper read to you (Type Four) are central tenets of the program. While there are no controlled studies I know of that test the effects of reading out loud versus not reading out loud, there is a great deal of anecdotal information from authors who talk about the power of this technique to improve the quality of the text. It is as if it is too obvious to study – who would not read their own work to themselves before sharing? Well, if you teach, you know the answer – most of your students! Also, oral reading is a study skill. Read what you’ve written out loud and you’ll remember it longer.

SW: The Collins Writing Program seems to focus most on writing to inform, persuade and explore. Why?

JC: You are correct. The program focuses on informative and persuasive writing rather than on narrative (story writing) or, more specifically, personal narrative. In the U.S., some of the best work in writing has been done in the primary grades, but in the early grades students write about their personal lives because that is all they know. As they go up the grades, subject area content dominates and many students have a difficult time making the transition from personal narrative to content-based writing. I want to give teachers a way to help students think about content through writing, and I want to give teachers an efficient and fair means to assess student work without requiring all teachers to be expert writing teachers. Also, the new federal laws in the U.S. require extensive testing by states. Many of these state tests use written answers as well as multiple choice questions as a tool to assess student knowledge. Our only national tests, the SAT and ACT, used for college entrance, both have added twenty-five minute writing tests. After grade three or four, none of these tests ask for personal narratives. They all ask the student to respond to informative or persuasive prompts. Also much real-world writing is informative or persuasive, not narrative.

For further information about the Collins Writing Program, or to place an international order, visit www.collinsed.com, call Collins Education Associates at 978-363-1188 (USA) or send an email to contactus@collinsed.com.