

# Investigating the Teaching of Writing Frames: Raising Standards In Boys' Writing

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## > Aim

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To investigate how writing frames can be used to improve the standard of boys' writing.

## > Dimensions of this Case Study

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Twelve Year 5 children in two groups of six and their teacher took part in this study. The school was an urban primary school.

## > Summary of Findings of this Case Study

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- Both the test and the control groups made significant gains in writing skills during the 3-week teaching programme using writing frames for non-fiction writing.
- The teaching method that improved the standard of boys' report writing the most, was when writing frames were used with teacher modelling through guided reading and writing.
- Girls' writing showed greater improvement when they had individual conferences with the teacher.
- All pupils enjoyed being taught how to use writing frames. They found them useful and saw that their writing had improved.
- Both groups perceived that they had made progress. The pupils in the control group felt they had improved slightly whereas the pupils in the intervention group felt that they had made good progress and were able to write more.
- The structure of the Literacy Hour was a key factor for successful teaching using writing frames because:
  - the teacher modelled the use of writing frames in text level work;
  - the technicalities of writing were the focus of the sentence level work; and
  - further modelling took place during group writing.

## Background

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This study was undertaken in a Year 5 class at Bidston Avenue Primary School in Wirral. The school has 28% of its children on Free School Meals. Although the school had experienced success in improving boys' writing skills in Key Stage 2, it was found that there was group of boys who were less experienced writers. They did not enjoy writing in fiction genres and were also reluctant readers of fiction. It was with this group in mind that the project was designed. The focus was non-fiction reading and writing. The writing genre that was chosen was Reports.

## Writing Frames

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In recent research by Wray & Lewis (1997) there is some evidence that children learn to improve the structure of their writing if they use writing frames. Writing frames are pro-formas that provide an outline of the overall text structure, scaffolding the writer at the whole text level, which is an important element of the support they offer in extended writing. They also organise writing by the use of headings or connectives e.g. first we did..., then we did ..., and finally we.... . Whilst the appropriate connectives are essential, they are only part of the support offered by the frame.

Further small scale classroom studies, including that of Saunders (1998), provide evidence that the use of teaching writing frames can be a significant factor in improving children's writing. The use of teacher modelling was also found to be a successful teaching method.

## The Literacy Hour

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This research project aimed to investigate the use of writing frames and teaching methods within the structure of the Literacy Hour.

- The text level focus was used to demonstrate how to read for information and how to organise the writing in a report.
- The sentence level focus was used to demonstrate how to construct sentences in the present tense and how to use connectives.
- During the group activity the teacher used different teaching methods with different

groups in the class, but essentially the content was the same. This part of the lesson was designed to reinforce concepts learnt in the text and sentence level foci. Other aspects were demonstrated, for example how to use the technical vocabulary associated with the subject.

## The Teaching Methods

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In the group writing part of the lesson, the different teaching methods were used. In one group the teacher used *teacher modelling* in the form of guided reading and writing. The teacher guided the group with their reading and writing, working with the pupils and helping them to compile their information from the source material. By demonstrating and modelling the teacher showed them how to organise this information using the writing frame. The pupils produced individual work, but as a group project, receiving input and teacher modelling as a group.

In the other group the teacher used *conferencing*. The writing frames and the information sources were presented to the pupils who then had to compile the report using the writing frame. Each child produced a piece of writing and the teacher held an individual conference with each child, giving feedback and advice on how to improve that writing.

## The Teaching Groups

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The groups were selected by using NFER 6-12 Group Reading Test. There were 12 children whose results were below a standardised score of 100 (average for a child of that age) but were above 70 (below average). With the additional information from teacher assessments of non-fiction writing, these children were put into 2 groups of 6 with a very similar make-up. The groups were mixed boys and girls, but the analysis of data looks purely at the performance of the boys in accordance with the aim of the study.

One group was designated the Test Group and they followed the guided reading and writing programme.

The other group was designated the Control Group and they were taught using the writing conference approach.

## The Teaching Programme

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The programme of teaching covered a block of 12 lessons over a 3-week period. In this time the work in literacy was focused on Report Writing. Each lesson had the Literacy Hour structure. The lesson began with text level work and was followed by sentence level work. Both entailed direct teaching to the whole class.

The text level work was either:

- shared reading from non-fiction big books, with the teacher demonstrating how to collect information;
- shared writing, with the teacher modelling how to write using all or parts of the report format and with the writing frame; or
- redrafting enlarged versions of the children's own writing.

The sentence level work focused on the more technical parts of the children's writing including the use of:

- the present tense;
- the 3<sup>rd</sup> person;
- connectives to extend sentences; and
- paragraphs.

The group activities were organised on a weekly programme to ensure that all children had their entitlement to the teacher's time.

Day	Teaching Group
Monday	<b>Special Needs:</b> Shared writing & individual programmes
Tuesday	<b>Test Group:</b> Teacher modelling Group reading and writing
Wednesday	<b>Control Group:</b> Independent writing with Teacher Conferences
Thursday	<b>More experienced:</b> Independent writing with Teacher Conferences

The test group worked with the teacher for one session each week. In this session the teacher modelled how to read for information, how to

organise the information and how to use the writing frames.

The control group also worked with the teacher for one session each week. In this session the teacher discussed the work with each child and gave directions about where to get the information and how to use the writing frames

Children not in the teaching group, on any day worked independently on their report writing using a writing frame.

## The writing frames

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At the start of the programme the children used detailed writing frames to provide structure to their writing and as the programme progressed, these writing frames became less structured, but still contained the components of Reports.

In the first week the writing frames concentrated on developing a *classifying sentence* at the start of the report and developing paragraphs of information. All the information came from a single source.

In the second week the children were taught to collect information from multiple sources and used the writing frames to develop the writing into paragraphs with sub-headings.

In the final week the children were expected to produce Reports independently without the use of a writing frame.

## Assessment and Marking

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On the first day of the intervention programme the work of the test group and the control group was assessed on the basis of a report that they had written, using the detailed writing frame.

The pupils were re-assessed at the end of the intervention, again, on the basis of their written reports. This time the reports were based on multiple sources of information and produced without the aid of a writing frame or teacher input.

Two marking schemes were used to provide a double check on the findings to ensure their accuracy:

- one, based on the Transactional Writing Task Marking Scheme used by Mary Neville (1988), was adapted to match the components of Reports. This scheme used arbitrary marks to measure achievement that were weighted towards the technicalities of Report writing;
- the other, was the Herring Marking Scheme (1999) based on the National Test Marking Scheme but adapted to focus on the components of non-fiction writing.

## Findings

It was clear at the end of the intervention period that the teaching strategy fitted well into the structure of the Literacy Hour, using the lesson sequencing described earlier.

### Comparison of the score improvement using the Neville Scheme

Boys	Mean Score Improvement
Test Group	11.5
Control Group	8
Difference	3.5

This table shows the mean improvement in assessment scores for the test group and the control group and the difference in improvement between the two groups.

### Comparison of the improvement in National Curriculum levels using the Herring Analysis

Boys	Mean Gain in Level
Test Group	0.75
Control Group	0
Difference	0.75

This table shows the mean improvement in the assessment scores for the test group and the control group and the difference between the groups. This scheme uses National Curriculum levels as the basis of assessment. A mean gain of

three quarters of a level over the three-week period of the intervention suggests substantial progress. The Neville Scheme gives weighted marks for particular components of writing so although both schemes show learning gains the scores themselves are not comparable.

It is clear from these results that the teaching methods that improved the standard of boys' report writing the most, were teacher modelling and group writing using writing frames. The organisation and layout of the text, and the boys' use of vocabulary and sentence construction showed the most improvement.

The use of writing frames alongside teacher conferencing also showed improvement in the standard of boys' report writing, but not to the same extent as group writing, as can be seen from the Neville scheme results. (It is worth noting at this point that although the girls in the groups were not the focus of the study they appeared to benefit most from the teacher conferencing method and this is an area for further study.)

It seems reasonable to conclude that the boys' non-fiction writing improved when they were taught how to approach it. The use of writing frames helped them to organise their writing and made them consider the technical details of writing. However, it was the teacher modelling and group writing that appeared to make the difference, between the two groups.

## Children's responses

The children were interviewed at the end of the intervention and asked their views about writing reports in the way they had and how they thought they had progressed.

Pupils in both groups had enjoyed using the writing frames and the subject material on which they had worked. The real difference was in their sense of achievement. The children in the teacher conferencing group felt they had improved a little as a result of using the writing frames, whereas the children in the intervention group felt their writing had improved a lot and they were writing much more.

## Conclusion

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The results of this small-scale study can be nothing more than indicative but they add further weight to an accumulating body of evidence that the use of writing frames linked to teacher modelling is one strategy that helps some writers.

## Future Developments

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These findings have been presented to the Wirral Education Authority. As a result they have decided to support a further study using more schools in the sample. This study will look into the same teaching methods but will cover a range of non-fiction writing types.

## Further Reading

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