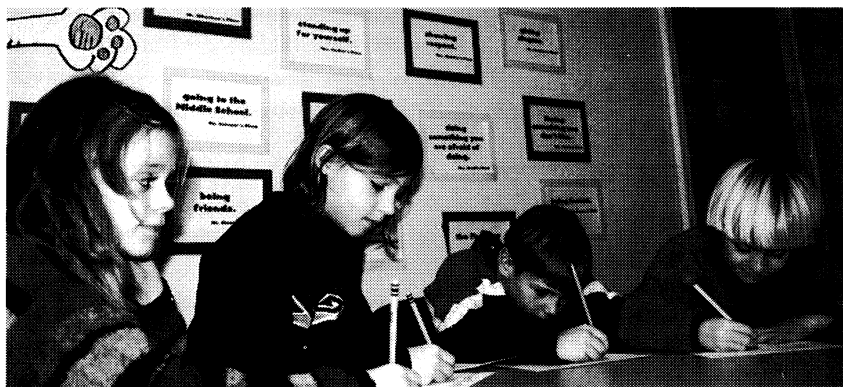


# Support for the reluctant writer (putting the talk and drawing first)

Richard Ward and Stephanie Dix

*“Literacy teachers and researchers are well aware that some children have difficulty with writing, particularly in getting started with a piece. Such writers are sometimes labelled ‘reluctant’ because they clearly do not enjoy writing.”*



## Introduction

Literacy teachers and researchers are well aware that some children have difficulty with writing, particularly in getting started with a piece. Such writers are sometimes labelled ‘reluctant’ because they clearly do not enjoy writing. They show few of the behaviours associated with ownership of the process or the production of effective writing and, in comparison with others in their age group, make little progress. Indeed, for some of these, the increasing frustration with which they approach a writing task, may promote regression and the adoption of other behaviours in order to avoid writing.

The term ‘reluctant’ however, may not be appropriate for their abilities in other modes of language. Observations suggest that many reluctant writers do not experience the same frustrations in other literacy activities. They are often competent talkers, drawers and movers; particularly in out-of-class settings. Their reluctance to write stems from their frustration in not being able to use the written word in a meaningful way.

The frustration then, is one that is more fundamental than that of having difficulty in getting started in a piece, or being aware that the

teacher will be the sole responder to it. At one level, it is a product of the difficulty of having little control of the writing process. As Hammond (1993) stated, “We wish them a good journey but may leave them without a map for their travels” (p. 116). At a more functional level it includes the frustration of translating ideas into letter and word patterns.

Observations from working with frustrated writers in classrooms suggest that four techniques offer useful support structures for them that expands their competence. These are particularly effective when used in an integrated manner at all stages of the writing process. They included, developing oral structures, fostering the use of drawing, offering explicit demonstrations, and supportive feedback.

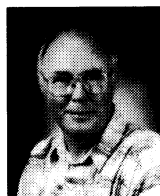
## The role of talk

Throughout the writing process, the frustrated writer can benefit from knowing that talk offers more than a means of generating ideas, or clarifying thoughts and organising possibilities. Talk can also endorse the desired word patterns. The process is both generative and consolidatory.



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Generative talk stimulates thinking and encourages the writer to draw on personal and previous experiences. Reluctant writers write best from their own experiences. "The closer they are to a real experience...the more sharply and specifically they will write" (Ministry of Education, 1992, p. 85). Talk also enables the reluctant writer to clarify ideas about the participants, the setting and the actions. For example, generative talk occurs in response to prompts such as "What happened?" "Who was there?" "What did they do?" This may occur as part of the teacher's probing or as part of a discussion with a writing partner.

Consolidatory talk, however, endorses what will actually be written. It helps the writer to formulate and confirm the word patterns to express the ideas. Questions that support consolidation may include "What happened?" "What happened next?" "Tell me again." "What will you

write?" or, "How will you write that?" For the reluctant writer, in order to consolidate language patterns, teacher prompts may include the repetition of phrases or the restating of questions in a similar way. For example, in order to consolidate the phrase, "the dog barked", the teacher may ask, "What happened when the visitors arrived?" and later, "What did the dog do?" An alternative technique in getting started in writing, may include asking the child to write two starter sentences. These can be shared with someone else, discussed and a decision made as to which one will be used.

To support the reluctant writer, talking about what comes next precedes each part of the writing. As the writer works to translate ideas into written language this should involve further discussion that assists formulating sentences, and encourages continued rereading, writing and revising. This may include additional drawing and talking to this as a

means of clarifying and consolidating ideas. The writer may refer to their drawing for the next part and in turn, talk about what they will write; a kind of oral revision (See figures 1 and 2)

### Encouraging the use of drawing

Generative and consolidatory talk may involve talking around the child's drawings. Drawing or sketching supports the reluctant writer by providing an alternative and visual form of expression that may act as a catalyst for writing. The teacher supports this link. For example, the child may draw themselves at the beach or sketch an autumn leaf yet lack the confidence to construct these ideas into words and sentences. In part, this has been explained by Kress' (1997) differentiation between the use of letters as pictures of ideas, and letters as pictures of sounds. Children have easier access to the former, what Kress (1997) saw as a "natural



Figure 1: Talking to drawing (i)  
Pupil talk: "This is my tree wih lemons and apples."

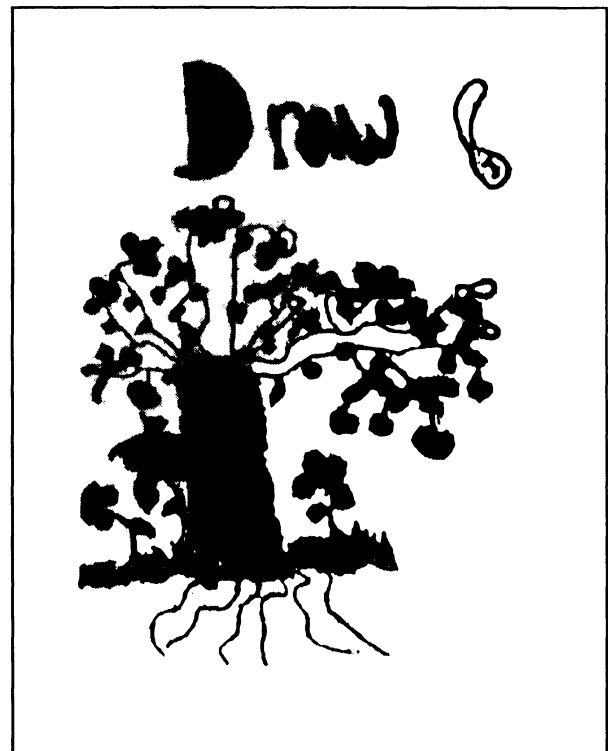


Figure 2: Talking to drawing (ii). Pupil has added both to the drawing and to the talk the drawing.  
Pupil talk: "There are leaves. The branches are longer. There are lemons and apples."

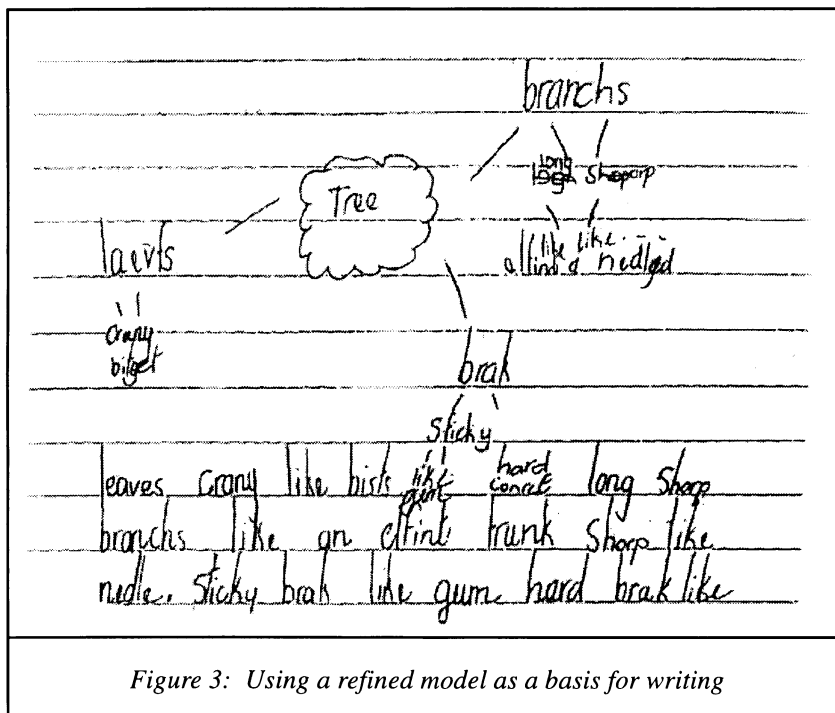


Figure 3: Using a refined model as a basis for writing

form of representing ideas” (p. 84). Hammond (1993) referred to “my screen” or “the place where I see things in my head” (p. 116) and regarded a perceptual base for writing as the most valuable tool for writers to have. Teachers capitalise on this when they encourage children to draw their piece and talk about it. In this way the visual representation acts as a support for the talk. Together, the visual and the talk provide a means of generating ideas and of rearranging and structuring these. This is refining their writing thoughts.

### Teacher demonstrations

During any stage of the process the reluctant writer may also be supported by teacher demonstrations, particularly those that show how thoughts and ideas can be jotted down, sentences constructed and rearranged. In part this may begin with the development of a word bank or by recording key words and phrases. By encouraging the writer to discuss their thoughts and have the teacher record these, the teacher demonstrates the links between cognition and symbolic language. Furthermore the teacher may demonstrate how these can be sorted into a possible order or

structure for the piece. *Dancing with the pen* (1992) suggested that the ordering of key ideas assisted the writer in refining and structuring ideas (Ministry of Education).

The writer is further supported by teacher demonstrations that show how to write down ideas, that is to transfer the jottings or word bank into sentences. Cambourne (1988) maintained that when the teacher “combines thinking out loud and talking out loud with the actual demonstrations of doing writing ... it helps learners make conscious connections between the oral and written forms of language” (p. 104). During the teacher demonstrations the writer may not only see examples of word generation and consolidation but how to select and discard ideas, how to construct sentences and how to approximate spelling difficult words. (See figure 3).

During the writing, the teacher can model how to make changes to writing by offering useful demonstrations of how make changes and revise texts. “Writers need teacher demonstrations As much of the revision process is internal, children require teachers to verbalise the thinking” (Dix, 2001, p. 47). Teacher

demonstrations of effective revision techniques show children that texts are malleable and can be ‘messed with’ to achieve greater clarity. These demonstrations may include how to add information, rewrite phrases, use a more appropriate word and change sentence beginnings. This offers an easier way for a reluctant writer to capture what has been said and decide if parts need to be rewritten. As confidence in the topic increases, the writer may move to a stage of defending their choices, inclusions and revisions. For the reluctant writer this may be a developmental, though recursive process.

Prior to publication, it is advantageous for teacher and writer to discuss how a piece may be presented and shared. This might include discussing samples of different formats. The teacher may demonstrate editing for clarity and also attention to the surface features of writing; spelling, punctuation and grammar. In spelling, the teacher recognises the writer’s use of approximations and shows how resources may be used. A connection is made between the use of temporary spelling and the compilation of a personal word list. For grammatical changes, the teacher demonstrates how ‘we say things’ and might note the inclusion of a grammatical example in future shared reading or shared writing lessons.

If the reluctant writer has a perspective of publishing that includes it being no more than a rewrite of the draft, then alternatives may be offered. These include having another person publish it on a word processor. Alternatively the writer may choose to publish an excerpt, rather than the whole piece. During the publishing process, the reluctant writer may benefit from demonstrations of how to ‘cut and paste’ a piece, how to insert illustrations and how to label these. The overall perspective is that the writer has ownership of the method of publication,

including who else might be involved and the intended audience.

### Supportive feedback

Throughout the writing process the writer benefits from supportive feedback from the teacher and others in their writing community. The reluctant writer often requires more frequent responses to their attempts than others might. But supportive feedback permeates all stages of the process.

However the child must have time to write for themselves. Only when text has been produced is it necessary to again involve others. This may include a roving conference where the teacher is able to readily respond to the writer's requests. A useful support question that retains the writer's ownership includes, "How can I help you with your writing?" Time for writing alone allows the child to implement the demonstrations they've seen and to work at their own pace, attempting to match the ideas in their head to words on the paper.

Having written a piece, the writer is encouraged to reread their writing. This may be shared with the teacher who affirms their efforts before asking them to clarify or elaborate on ideas. Asking questions such as, "How did he feel?" or "What did it look like?" may lead to further elaboration of the piece. But the priority is to first acknowledge the writer's efforts and only seek expansion when there is clearly inadequate clarity in the message.

Another technique that encourages elaboration is Buddy Journal writing. This involves the teacher setting up a written dialogue with the writer that includes open-ended questions. Not only does Buddy Journal responding offer an addition to illustrating the piece, it extends the volume of writing and has obvious links with reading.

Other feedback opportunities include setting up a supportive peer-group conference to provide a listening audience and opportunities to respond to the

writer. In this way supportive peers may question the writer for further clarification and offer further ideas, such as, "What happened when..?" or, "Can you tell me more about the part where...?" The conference provides an opportunity for the writer to revisit their piece and clarify the message. Conferencing can also highlight the writer's particular way of saying something and reflect the voice of the writer. In this way, a writer recognises that their style or way of saying something is valued.

Teacher feedback is part of the total writing process. The teacher's choice of what to demonstrate is dependent on an awareness of what would provide useful feedback for the writer. During conferencing the teacher selects particular aspects of the writing process or outcome to offer feedback. In a supportive writing community, feedback from others offers confidence for further writing. Feedback can also be reflective. This occurs when the teacher asks the writer to look back on previous attempts and identify elements in their personal progress. In this way feedback is actually a form of ongoing monitoring.

Finally the writer must experience success and have a real audience who will appreciate their writing. Whether the writing is presented by being pinned on the wall, read at an assembly or to the child next door, the reluctant writer needs their efforts to be heard and valued. They need a supportive response to their final product. This reinforces that the writing has been purposeful and worthwhile, and that the child has been involved in a successful and meaningful process.

Literacy teachers recognise the importance of setting up a supportive and affirming environment for writing; one where the child feels confident enough to experiment and explore their own ideas and also know that their writing will be acknowledged and their attempts

valued. Marie Clay maintained that "every writing opportunity should be rich enough to give the child a chance to expand competence" (p. 131) and gain inner control of literacy learning.

The particular support required by the reluctant writer is not necessarily that afforded to those at the lower progress end of the writing continuum, but a kind of support that integrates support strategies in a manner that allows the reluctant writer to use enabling scaffolds to overcome the frustrations of writing. It is suggested that a revised view of the roles of talking, drawing, demonstrations and feedback might offer this support.

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The illustrations used are intended to show a process that might support a reluctant writer and are not necessarily examples from reluctant writers.