

Book Review: Writing for impact: Teaching students how to write with a plan and spell well

Reviewed by **Nathaniel Swain.**

Tom Nicholson and Sue Dymock, Writing for impact: Teaching students to write with a plan and spell well, NZCER Press, 2018

I am always on the look-out for textbooks that cover the core of good writing instruction, and are written directly for educators in the classroom. Why should the science of reading and writing be hidden from mainstream teachers? There are few texts out there that I would recommend to teachers to tackle the entire question of “how do I teach writing?”, but *Writing for Impact* makes the grade.

The two-volume text contains a treasure trove of research, tools, strategies, lesson plans, and links to further resources. Readers can dive into the world of teaching writing with little presumed knowledge, making it accessible to a wide professional audience.

Unfortunately, with reading being such a worthy topic of research and practice, writing can often feel like its poor cousin. Writing can be but a neglected after-thought in many classrooms or clinics. This is in spite of the fact that writing is the most visible form of literacy, and that students’ writing becomes a tool that reflects, but also *shapes* their learning. It is encouraging to have this contribution to the professional literature to assist writing to “stake its claim” in literacy teaching.

Too often instructional texts are either way up in the clouds—

proclaiming that teachers need only foster a “love of writing” and the like; or down low in the trenches—discussing effect sizes without the realities of how to motivate students to engage in and enjoy learning how to write.

What is refreshing when reading *Writing for Impact* is how Nicholson and Dymock have woven together aspects of writing development and teaching that are usually disconnected: The evidence for what works for children’s writing, and the murkiness of everything that contributes to children’s (feelings of) success as “writers”. By this I mean the motivation, creativity, and content knowledge that sits behind good writing.

The authors set the scene by reviewing the research on what works in writing instruction, synthesising the effective practices from six meta-analyses. It comes as no surprise that it’s helpful for students to use strategies like graphic organisers and writing planners when they write. Similarly receiving targeted and specific feedback on their writing is incredibly effective. One surprising insight explored in the book is that grammar instruction when taught outside the context of writing has no impact, or can have a negative effect on children’s writing! (The authors do provide alternative ways of targeting grammar during the writing process, such as sentence combining, but in my opinion there isn’t nearly enough on this topic.)

Via a few subtle asides, the authors also make the case for new approaches to teaching writing to be drawn from teachers documenting and researching their own practice. This is a worthy message to teachers in classrooms around the world who are developing and refining innovative, but as yet *untested*, approaches that warrant formal investigation. Data is a powerful tool for teachers not just as evidence of their students’ learning, but of the effectiveness of their teaching.

When collected rigorously—using single case design, for example—this “practice-based evidence” could justify more elaborate research, and pave the way for more impactful and engaging teaching practices for children from a range of backgrounds.

In Chapter 3, Nicholson and Dymock explore two evidence-based writing approaches in detail: The Read-Write Enquiring School model, and the Self-Regulated Strategy Development approach. Consistent with the rest of the book, the tone is quite informal in this chapter, and welcoming for professionals who are not familiar with the research literature. Readers are given a chance to delve deeply into the many components of each approach, and the evidence-base underpinning them. A small minority of practices included in this section are notoriously vague and used passionately in balanced literacy circles (e.g. Writer’s Workshop). But if you can look past this, you will see that the authors are dedicated to an evidence-based, but practical view of writing instruction that helps teachers answer the question: “but *how* do I teach that?”.

The authors frequently acknowledge that there is always a range of approaches that teachers can use, but that choosing the high impact teaching practices supports students to learn to write most effectively. The small section of teaching students with writing difficulties was particularly helpful in chapter 2, providing an overview of the scope of different skills that students need to develop in their writing.

When working with students on their writing, there is always a tension



between focussing on the mechanics of their work (Vocabulary, Grammar, Punctuation, Spelling, Formatting), and encouraging the free-flowing creative business that hopefully produces the sparkle that good writing gives off to its readers. *Writing for Impact* manages to give emphasis to all of these elements, and provides practical ways for teachers to manage this tension themselves.

By first exploring the three major kinds of text (Narrative, Informative, and Persuasive), the authors give a useful overview of the products that students are aiming to write. The emphasis on teaching story structure, and the use of story planners was comfortingly familiar to a narrative devotee like myself. But other tips, like the “story graph” for example, were a welcome addition to my battery of strategies for deconstructing and constructing texts with students. Similarly, the taxonomy of informative texts, and demonstration of visual organisers for these, were very useful scaffolding tools which I have already started using with my students.

The conventions chapters then delve into the mechanics of writing, starting first with vocabulary. Despite it being a solid introduction to vocabulary teaching, I would recommend teachers continue to enhance their teaching of vocabulary with the longstanding vocabulary textbooks, as *Writing for Impact* only squeezes in a taste of this meaty subject. The spelling chapters are well thought out, and contain good introductions to the use of phonics and morphology for teaching spelling in a way that is systematic, but that also explores the richness of the English language with students. As with the vocabulary chapter, texts that explore the structure of the English language and spelling system in greater detail should be read in addition to Nicholson and Dymock’s test to bolster teacher knowledge in this space.

While the chapters on grammar, punctuation and handwriting/ keyboarding are not as comprehensive, it is nice to see a writing textbook that does not ignore these aspects of writing. The handwriting chapter intrigued me to learn more about the paper and pen positions for left-handed writers!

Writing for Impact is a good introduction for teachers starting their literacy teaching journey as few other texts will tackle, all in one place, the many levels of writing instruction and the range of different skills that students need to develop in tandem to become proficient writers.

The lesson plans provide a good starting point and model of how teachers might tackle these approaches in the classroom. There are also freely available videos for anyone to check out at the *Writing for Impact* website: <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/writing-for-impact>. These would be helpful for teachers who haven’t seen these strategies or approaches before, and need a demonstration of a few ways of tackling them. The samples of children’s writing throughout the two volumes is also very illustrative.

I would have liked to see more lesson plan or video examples for the older struggling writer, so that middle to upper secondary school or alternative education teachers had some examples of how to pitch it to an older audience, but perhaps there’s room here for further work to capture and illustrate practice for these groups of students?

It’s a text that continues an important discussion around questioning practices that don’t work and fostering approaches that best develop all students, as well as those who require additional support. *Writing for Impact* successfully guides teachers of writing to know not just what to do, but *how* to do it well. I sincerely hope that this text finds its audience with not just reading and writing specialists, but with teachers working in classrooms every day, so its impact can be as wide as possible.

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