

Introduction to the special issue on writing

Tom Nicholson reflects on the challenges of writing, describes the simple view of writing, suggests the value of a checklist, and gives an overview of the articles in this special issue.

I have a love hate relationship with writing even though I write a lot. I am not sure why this is the case but I think it goes back to an English examination in my last year at Fairfield Boys High School in Sydney. The essay topic was “the supercilious cat”. I had no idea what supercilious meant. If only the prompt for the essay was “the snooty cat” or “the haughty cat” or “the snobby cat” or “the patronizing cat” or “the toffee-nosed, uppity, jumped up, hoity-toity, high and mighty, too big for your boots cat”. All these are synonyms in my thesaurus that I would have understood. What did I do? I just gave up, I could not figure out what to write so wrote nothing. If I knew then what the writers in this special issue are telling us now, I would not have panicked and might even have written a winner.

Another part of this love-hate relationship goes back to University days and the grade I got for my first English essay. In the essay, I did what I did in high school quite successfully, that is, I regurgitated other people’s ideas. This time it did not work. I managed to get an E grade. When I asked my University lecturer what I should do to get a better mark he suggested I should switch to another subject.

The importance of ideas and spelling

These were great experiences, really, finding out what you need to do to become an effective writer; in my case, to learn that vocabulary is important, not to give up, and to write with your own voice. There is another face to writing, though, which is the ability to spell well. Competent spelling will enable you to write fluently without having to think about the mechanics of putting letters on the page. These two faces of writing, ideas and spelling, are both crucial for effective writing.

The good news ... is that we can teach students how to write good ideas and spell well.

Not being able to think of ideas to write about is very common. Many students spend all the available time given them to write an essay thinking about how to do this but then write very little even on a familiar topic like “How do you say good bye to a goldfish that has passed away?” They cannot think of

what to say. Yet it is not an impossible topic. With such a topic, you could write a story about organising a funeral for the fish, who would make the speeches, etc. It is perfectly possible to write a winning story even on a tricky topic but we need to teach students how to do this well.

Likewise, research shows that many students with writing difficulties fall behind because of their spelling, for example, not knowing how to spell words like “goldfish”. Most of their writing time is spent worrying about spelling and as a result having little or no time to put their thoughts on paper. The good news (which is the focus of this issue of the LDA Bulletin) is that we can teach students how to write good ideas and spell well.

The simple view of writing (and the not so simple view)

These two faces of writing are the basis of the simple view of writing, as shown in Figure 1 (Nicholson & Dymock, 2018).

The simple view says that effective writing requires two things: good ideas and good spelling. You need both. The student with good ideas but poor spelling will not be an effective writer mainly because they will not write much. Likewise, if you are a good speller but without good ideas, your writing will not work because you need some interesting ideas. The simple view of writing is a multiplicative model; it says that $W = I \times S$ (writing = ideas x spelling). Your ideas may be 100% wonderful but if your spelling is zero, your writing is zero. Likewise, your spelling may be 100% perfect but if you have zero ideas, then writing is zero. You need both good ideas and good spelling to succeed. In terms of teaching, the model predicts

that if you can improve students’ spelling and their ability to generate ideas – this should lead to better writing.

Of course, the simple view of writing is probably too simple. Certainly, the articles in this special issue highlight this. The concept of “ideas” involves both the information we write about and how we convey the information. That is, it includes organisation, coherence, vocabulary, and grammar. Likewise, spelling skill is important but we also need to include handwriting and keyboarding skill. This makes for a more complex model, especially if you add metacognitive aspects to it like self-regulation and ability to focus on the task. Figure 2 is a sketch of what the not so simple view of writing might look like and it specifies all these other aspects of writing. It does show more of the complexity of writing and it fits quite well with the articles in this special issue.

Which brings us to the contributors to this special issue

Peter Westwood reviews the research on teaching writing. While many teachers say they can teach writing, the research also says that many teachers feel unprepared and untrained to teach writing well. What can we do to remedy this situation? In this article, Peter shows that some approaches have a higher effect size than others. Using these data, a teacher can make better decisions about what to teach. (Note: Just in case you are wondering, an “effect size” (ES) is a way to compare the findings of different studies in terms of their impact. Although each study might write up their findings in different ways, we can compare them using this

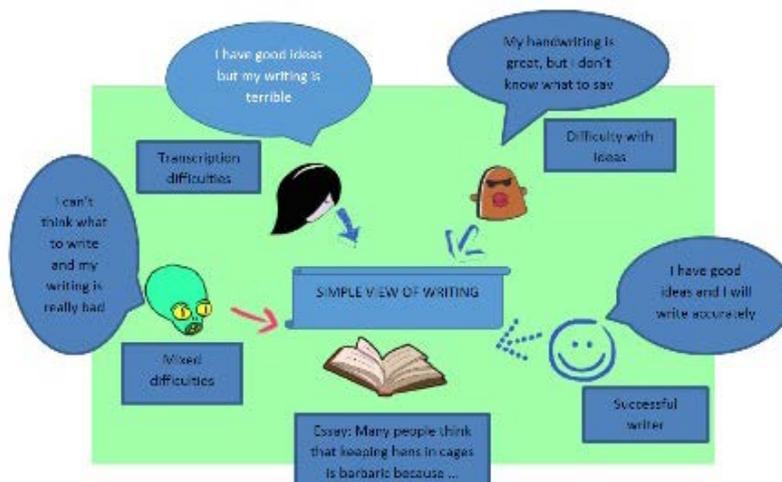


Figure 1. The simple view of writing

common metric. An ES of .2 is small, an ES of .5 is medium, and an ES of .8 or more is large. An ES of .4 is equivalent to about the progress in one school year in a particular subject. A more than average way of teaching writing will have an effect size of more than .4.)

How do you teach someone to write well? In their article **Amber Ray** and **Steve Graham** explain that effective writing does not develop naturally but that we can teach it. They explain a much-researched and successful approach to teaching writing called SRSD (Self-Regulated Strategy Development), which encourages students to write with a plan, use text structure, monitor their work, and write with confidence.

Many successful people tell us that they cannot spell very well so is spelling a problem when it comes to writing? Yes, it is. **Vince Connelly**, **Lynsey O'Rourke**, and **Emma Sumner** explain that difficulties with spelling hamper the writing of people with dyslexia. It interferes with fluency, essay length, choice of vocabulary, and editing of work. Students with spelling difficulties really need extra spelling tuition, writing practice, and learn how to take advantage of recent technology, such as writing with computers and using spellcheckers.

Ros Neilson argues that we have to teach students to reach a level of competence where their spelling enables rather than disables their ability to write what they want to say. She describes

the very real struggles of students she works with and suggests that the key to progress is with our teachers, but that today's teachers need knowledge about the English spelling system, knowledge that they lack because they themselves did not learn to spell well in school. She suggests that phonics taught by knowledgeable teachers will enable many more students to spell well and will enable them to write well rather than disable them.

Is handwriting a relic of the distant past? Some say that it is and in certain places the teaching of handwriting is not required in the curriculum. Is this good or not? **Karin James** and **Virginia Berninger** explain how evidence from brain research supports the teaching of handwriting. Learning to write by hand is not only helpful in itself, but has positive effects on letter learning, word reading, and writing.

Sue Dymock explains that while many students are very good spellers, many find spelling incredibly difficult. For some, spelling can be "caught" through extensive reading and writing but many students need spelling to be "taught". She shows how English spelling is method rather than madness, and that we can teach effective strategies to enable spelling success. She explains that with careful assessment and diagnosis teachers can identify what to teach and how to teach it effectively.

In the BOOK REVIEWS section, **Emma Nahna** reviews **David Kilpatrick's**

book on teaching reading to students with reading difficulties, while **Kate Munro** and **Ann Ryan** review **David Kilpatrick's** book on *Equipped for Reading Success*. **Jan Roberts** and **Nathaniel Swain** review the book by **Tom Nicholson** and **Sue Dymock** on teaching students how to write with a plan and spell well.

A take away message for teachers

An important outcome of this special issue will be if the reader comes away with some specific and practical ideas on teaching writing and some helpful hints for students. To help you get started, I have jotted down (see Figure 3) a possible checklist of everything a student needs to do to produce a winning essay. It combines my own ideas and the ideas that are in this special issue. You might want to use it with your class as a starting point to build up their own "Big 10" or "Big 5" rules – to construct a checklist that suits their needs and that they will find useful for them.

Final word

We know much more about how to teach writing well but it is not clear if these messages are reaching the classroom. Research shows that many students find writing difficult. By the time they enter secondary school nearly two in three students have difficulty reaching the standards required for that part of their school career. We need to try harder to reduce that number to a

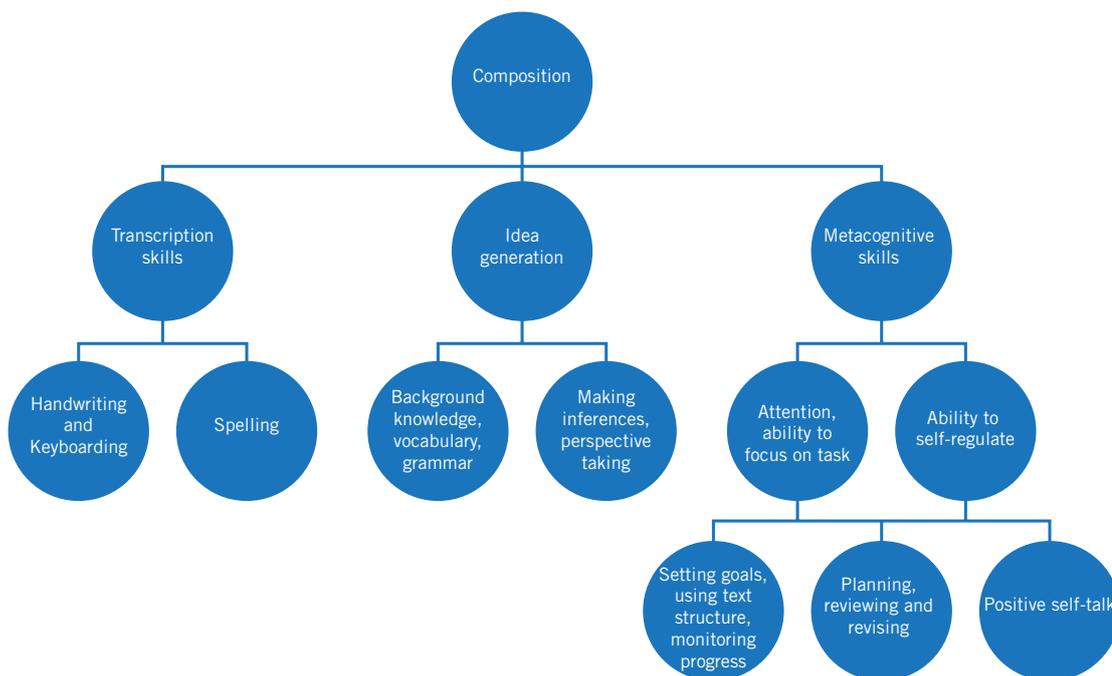


Figure 2. The not-so simple view of writing

much smaller fraction, and the good news is that we can do it.

Happy reading!

References

Nicholson, T. & Dymock, S. (2018). *Writing for impact: Teaching students how to write with a plan and spell well*. Wellington: NZCER Press.

Tom Nicholson is a freelance writer, formerly a professor of education at Massey University in New Zealand and a member of the Reading Hall of Fame. One day, in the future, he would

like to have his own website, write a children's book, and learn how to sketch with proper perspective. Email: t.nicholson@massey.ac.nz

The Big 10 Writing Rules

IDEAS

- 1 Use your prior knowledge to generate ideas for this topic - many writers draw on their own experiences for their writing
- 2 ...Write an abstract, a quick thumbnail sketch of what your writing will be about – 20 words
- 3 ...Transfer your ideas from the abstract to a text structure diagram and use this for your writing. Make sure the structure fits the topic, e.g., setting, characters, plot and theme for a story; subheadings for information writing e.g., habitat, features, and diet; for-against structure for persuasive essay, e.g., for school uniforms, against school uniforms.

PRESENTATION – INCLUDING SPELLING

- 4 ... Check accuracy– did you use correct spelling, punctuation?
- 5 ...Check neatness – is handwriting clear, easy to read?
- 6 ...Check vocabulary and grammar – did you use “sparkly” words, are sentences grammatically correct?

METACOGNITIVE

- 7 ...Did you write as much as you can – at least a page of writing?
- 8 ...is the information interesting and accurate, does it all tie together, is it convincing, do the arguments flow, do you have transition sentences from one paragraph to the next?
- 9 ... Is there a hook in the first sentence to engage the reader?
- 10 ...Is there a conclusion that wraps it all up?

Figure 3. The big 10 writing rules