'Bitzer,' said Thomas Gradgrind, ‘your definition of a horse?’

‘Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoof too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth’.

Thus (and much more) Bitzer. ‘Now girl number twenty,’ said Mr Gradgrind, ‘you know what a horse is’.

Charles Dickens  *Hard Times* (1854)
6 Writing Frames

Rationale

Writing frames help to develop pupils’ skills in writing by structuring their written responses. The frame provides this structure with clear sections and verbal prompts. They are particularly helpful for developing skills in non-fiction writing by providing practice in following the structures of different genres of writing and in using the language and vocabulary appropriate to these structures.

Writing frames can help pupils by asking the pupils to select, and think about what they have learnt, by encouraging pupils to re-order information and demonstrate their understanding rather than just copying out text. This enables all pupils to achieve some success at writing, a vital ingredient in improving self-esteem and motivation.

Writing frames can help some pupils in particular by preventing them from being presented with a blank sheet of paper – a particularly daunting experience for those for whom sustained writing is difficult. The frame also gives pupils an overview of the writing task by making it clear how much remains to be completed. Writing in primary schools in England has traditionally concentrated on narrative or ‘story writing’. Writing frames can therefore extend the genres of writing pupils learn to master which prepares them for the types of writing they will need in later stages of their education.

Modelling by the teacher

An important part of the process is the modelling provided by the teacher. A large version of the writing frame (or a large electronic version on an interactive whiteboard or data projector) is completed by the teacher. This part of the process is essential. The frames are not worksheets to be completed by the pupils unaided.

Implicit use: designing more effective tasks

They can be used implicitly and explicitly. When used implicitly the frame is presented as part of the task. At this level they are successful for a variety of reasons. The frame:

● is more inviting than a blank page;
● breaks down the task into a series of steps;
● can offer prompts and specific suggestions for vocabulary to use;
● makes the purpose of writing clear.

Used in this way writing frames resemble the Strategies earlier in the book.

Explicit use: developing a vocabulary for learning

Writing frames can also be used explicitly as part of the process of learning to write. Used in this way the purpose of the technique as well as the task is made clear and understood by the pupils. The teacher uses the modelling process both to demonstrate the skills and to explain her thinking about alternatives. In this way specific targets can be given to pupils about the different parts of the writing frame. The teacher reviews with the pupils the content of the writing as well as de-briefing the process of completing the writing frame and how she thinks it contributes to making them more successful learners. This final metacognitive step is probably not essential in improving pupils’ writing in the shorter term. However we believe it is a vital step in helping children to become successful learners. Used in this way writing frames are more like the Approaches described in the Section 2 of the book.

At this Level writing frames help to:

● focus pupils on specific aspects of writing they can improve;
● provide clear targets for improvement;
● make writing seem attainable (rather than something that you are just ‘good at’ or not);
● develop a metacognitive vocabulary (by talking about learning).

The Strategy is designed to support pupils by providing a structure (the sections of the frame) and prompts (the language used in each of the sections, or specific vocabulary. The structure needs to be withdrawn over a period of time, so that the pupils can write independently and effectively without the frame.
Procedure
A possible procedure for teaching *writing frames* might be as follows.

1. The teacher demonstrates using large version of the *frame* (*modelling*).
2. The teacher and pupils complete a *writing frame* together (*joint construction*).
3. The pupils use a *writing frame* to complete a task which is supported by the teacher and where the writing is seen as a draft (*scaffolding*).
4. Group discussion of particular examples to develop peer assessment (*group review*).
5. Plenary discussion of the types of language appropriate for the genre (*whole class review*).
6. The genre and its language features are added to pupils’ writing repertoire (*independence*).
7. Debriefing and discussion of how *writing frames* help make the process of writing attainable (*metacognition*).

It is important that *writing frames* are *always* used within appropriate curriculum work rather than in isolated study skills lessons. In other words, the use of a *writing frame* should arise from the pupils having a *purpose* for undertaking some writing and an appropriate *frame* introduced if needed.
For or against?

Prior experience
Developing particular genres of language is now an explicit part of the National Literacy Strategy in England. In Key Stage 1 (5 - 7 year olds) children are expected to be able to write simple instructions and to be able to use impersonal language and descriptions. By Year 4 (8 - 9 year olds) pupils are expected to be able to summarise and to use persuasive language and to assemble and sequence points of view in constructing an argument.

This class of Year 4 pupils had used writing frames previously to help structure their writing for instructional texts and report writing. However, the teacher was keen to develop the attitudes of pupils towards writing more generally and planned a series of activities using writing frames for literacy teaching but set in different curriculum contexts.

Whole class
A new housing estate was proposed for development on the edge of the small town where the majority of pupils lived. The teacher used an article from the local paper as a stimulus for the class discussion before the writing activity and explained that they were going to send in their writing to the local newspaper in response to the article.

The teacher then modelled writing two lists of advantages and disadvantages and talked about the words used for each.

Small group work
The pupils worked in pairs initially to discuss and plan their ideas. They had a copy of the writing frame (Resource 1) but were encouraged to make their own notes on scrap paper.

Once she was confident that the pupils knew what was expected she asked them to give examples of the points they had come up with.

Plenary
The teacher made sure she discussed ideas from the pupils that were clear examples of:

- establishing a position (thesis);
- stating a point (the argument);
- developing a point (elaboration);
- summary or restatement of the position (reiteration).

She then completed a large version of the writing frame using a flip-chart. To end the session she spent some time talking about how she had planned the writing frame and asked pupils to think about how it had helped them to develop their writing.

Using ICT
Writing continued in the afternoon following the focus on writing as part of the pupils’ work in geography. The class had a timetabled session in the school’s ICT room and used a prepared template file. She had constructed the outline of the writing frame in Microsoft Word using the table tools. Then she inserted free-text forms into each of the cells of the table. This had the advantage of only letting the pupils enter text in the appropriate places, and retaining the layout of the page.

Development
Over the course of the next few weeks the class undertook further writing tasks developing their understanding of discussion and persuasive writing (Resources 2 and 3). These aimed to support:

- a clear statement of the discussion;
- arguments for and supporting evidence;
- arguments against and supporting evidence;
- a summary and conclusion.

Each of the tasks was set in a similar context of the local area. The second activity was again based on local news; arguments for and against pedestrianising a shopping street in the centre of the town. The final one was taken from sources of information on the internet, examining arguments for and against drilling for oil in Alaska.
In terms of developing literacy, the teacher aimed to develop the pupils’ understanding of the genres of argument and discussion. She had clear evidence of work progressing towards this goal.

After the final session she planned an ‘awards ceremony’ session where she reviewed the development in the pupils' writing using the three writing frames. They were each encouraged to identify an aspect of their understanding of argument and discussion that had improved.

The teacher felt that the series of tasks had achieved both of her main aims. She felt it had helped pupils' writing and their understanding of argument, discussion and persuasive text in particular. This was partly because the tasks tapped into their opinions and set the writing in a purposeful context. In addition she thought that for some of the pupils the tasks had also helped them see themselves as more successful writers, though this would require further development in the future.

Exemplar 1: For or against?

It takes time to develop metacognition and the language of learning.
For or against?

Name: 

Title: 

The issue is:

Arguments for: 

Arguments against: 

So I think

This is because
### For or against?
#### Using evidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Date:</td>
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</table>

#### The issue is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arguments for:</th>
<th>Arguments against:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First point:</td>
<td>First point:</td>
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<td>The evidence for this is</td>
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<td>Second point:</td>
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<td>Third point:</td>
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<tr>
<td>The evidence for this is</td>
<td>The evidence for this is</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**My conclusion is**

**This is because**
### Resource 3

**For or against?**

**Looking at both sides of the argument**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Title:**

**Some words you might use:**

- because
- but
- however
- so
- this means

- I think that
- I know
- one reason is
- another point is
- the strongest argument
- considering
- in balance
- more important

**Arguments for:**


**Arguments against:**


**In conclusion:**


**This is because**
Life Cycle

Prior experience
The class of Year 2 pupils (6-7 year olds) were accustomed to using a variety of planning sheets and writing frames in literacy, but had not used them so extensively in other areas of the curriculum. The children were also just beginning to be able to undertake paired collaborative work and the teacher wanted to develop the pupils’ skills in evaluating their own work. In the previous week they had been asked to think up some good words to use in their writing which a partner noted down on scrap paper to help them. They were familiar with the stages in the life of a butterfly and the teacher wanted to use this to develop and assess their understanding of life cycles.

Whole class
The class knew the story of the *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle well and the teacher used illustrations of this to introduce the task. They were asked to complete and use the sheet (*Resource 1*) to explain the life cycle of a butterfly to one of their friends in preparation for taking it home to explain to their parents. The children were warned that the picture sheet and the dictionary mat contained some words and pictures that they would not need, as well as those that would be useful and that they would therefore have to decide which were the best ones to use in their explanation.

Small group work
The pupils worked individually on their tasks. Some pupils stuck pictures and matched words to complete the circles in the diagram (*Resources 4 and 5*). Others completed sentences in each circle using a dictionary mat with appropriate vocabulary. As they were working they were asked to check that their partner knew what they had to do and to explain where they had got to. Once they had completed this task the teacher stopped the class and highlighted a few examples which exemplified what he had intended. He then asked them to stop and explain their life cycle sheet to the person sitting next to them. After this he then asked a series of questions which the ‘evaluator’ had to tell the ‘author’ whether they understood their explanation and how the life cycle sheet helped.

In the final task for the session the children were given another life cycle sheet and asked to choose an animal where they could describe its life cycle. They were asked to draw and write or just write. The children took the butterfly sheets home to explain ‘life cycle’ and the teacher kept the final task as a record of their understanding.

Plenary
The teacher chose some of the children to present their own life cycle sheets to the class. He encouraged them to explain their thinking about the animal that they had chosen and asked others to comment on the presented work (the pupils were used to doing this and usually made positive critical comments about their peers). The discussion showed that some pupils had clearly understood what was meant by a life cycle (at least within their current understanding), as they could come up with other examples (eg egg, chick, hen, hen lays egg... or egg, tadpole, froglet, frog lays frogspawn), whilst others found describing and articulating this difficult. It was clearly easier for pupils to describe this for animals which had distinct stages (such as insects or amphibians, or even other animals that lay eggs such as reptiles and birds), whereas mammals were more difficult to describe.

He then spent some time talking about why he had arranged the life cycle sheet the way it was presented. One child commented ‘it’s like... living things have babies and the little babies grow up and have babies’. The teacher also noted with amusement one of the comments of one of the pupils ‘it’s called a life cycle coz it goes round and round like a bicycle wheel’. The teacher thought that the visual structure of the life cycle sheet may have helped to support this understanding of life cycles.

Development
The idea of a life cycle was revisited later in the year when the children completed reports on animals that they researched (*Resource 6*). As they reviewed this activity the teacher reminded them of the earlier work that they had done on life cycles and asked them to identify improvements in their knowledge as well as their writing skills.

The teacher also used writing frames in science investigations to develop their skills in reporting and recounting what they had done, as well as in explaining their understanding and what they had learned. Writing frames were used in other curriculum areas too: comparing historical artefacts and customs; and describing landscapes in geography.
This is the life cycle of a

Name:

Date:
Exemplar 2: Life Cycle

Butterfly life cycle

- egg
- caterpillar
- cocoon
- butterfly
- snail
- mouse
## Resource 6  Living things report

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
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### Definition:
A .............................................. is ...........................................................................

It is a kind of

### Appearance:
What does it look like?

It is

### Habitat:
Where does it live?

It lives

### Life cycle:
How is it born?

How does it change?

It started life as

### Food:
What does it eat?

I know that
Summary

Writing frames are an indispensable tool in any teacher’s repertoire of activities for developing pupils’ writing. They can be used to support the development of specific skills and understanding of the language appropriate to different genres of writing. They can also be used to meet specific curriculum objectives by supporting pupils’ writing across the curriculum. These aims are both implicit in the teacher’s use of the technique.

In this way, using writing frames involves: having a clear purpose for the writing which the pupils can understand; modelling of the writing process by the teacher; and some supported writing (including drafting and improving the writing). The aim is that pupils should be able to use these skills independently in their own writing.

Writing frames can also be used more explicitly to develop understanding of the writing process and how this contributes to the teaching of writing as something attainable. In order to do this, some time needs to be spent with a pupil considering how using the writing frame has helped to improve their writing. This metacognitive approach is challenging and not easy to achieve in the short term. However, it is essential that short-term objectives in improving skills (in any area of the curriculum) are not taught at the detriment of a learner’s attitude to the whole process of learning. Developing positive attitudes enables learners to see themselves as successful and learning as attainable. It is this disposition towards learning that teaching thinking attempts to create.

Further reading and information

An essential text for developing understanding of the teaching and learning of writing and literacy more generally is Extending Literacy by David Wray & Maureen Lewis (1997). Chapter 10 looks at Writing non-fiction and describes the authors’ experience working with teachers to develop pupils’ writing using writing frames.

Bob Swartz has developed the use of ‘graphic organisers’ in the US as frames for writing in Infusing the teaching of critical and creative thinking into content instruction: a lesson design handbook for the elementary grades. (Swartz & Parks, 1994. California: Critical Thinking Press & Software).

Alistair Smith’s Accelerated Learning in Practice (Network Educational Press, 1998) describes an approach to developing pupils’ beliefs about themselves as learners using a variety of planning tools, frames, review and evaluation forms.

A good stimulus can make all the difference to an activity. Local newspapers can provide links into the geography and history curriculum. There are surprising sources of information on the Internet – the challenge is in finding them!
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