

# Teaching Sequences: An Introduction

As Primary English Advisers working as part of a larger school improvement team, we have been involved in raising standards in writing for many years. A large part of this support for teachers and schools has been with planning. We realised early on that it was most effective if we provided sequences of learning in outline, and then worked with teachers to adapt these to fit their class. Over time, these adaptations have been built into the sequences and we have now arrived at a point where we have a pathway of learning which is flexible enough to meet the needs of all classes.

The sequences are based on a three part structure which consists of:

- Learning about the text
- Practising writing
- Independent writing.

All of the sequences are based on high-quality pupils's literature which provide strong models of rich language and replicable structures, along with something worth talking about in terms of the content. The first thing you will meet on the sequence is an elicitation task.

## Elicitation task

The purpose of the elicitation task is to provide a starting point for the sequence and therefore a baseline measure to compare with the final outcome. This will mean that progress across the sequence can be made explicit for pupils. Teachers know their pupils well so this is not about whether a pupil uses capital letters and full stops but more about what the pupil knows and can do about this type of text. For example, if the sequence is about writing a set of instructions, an elicitation task will help decide whether imperatives need to be taught or whether the focus should be on ordering or adding detail through the use of adverbials.

With elicitation tasks, we support the pupils with what they might write about but we do not support how they write it. It is important that pupils approach this task with their best writing, trying use all that know about writing in this style. It is not important that pupils all write about the same thing. Often, better writing comes when pupils write about something that is important to them. The support with content is for those who cannot think of anything to write about.

We recommend that this task is undertaken before the sequence starts so that there is enough time to look through the writing and acknowledge what the pupils can already do and which aspects need to be focused on by the whole class and by groups of pupils in the sequence. Once this has been completed, it is possible to go through the sequence and adapt it by taking out those things that are not relevant for the class and adding in any other activities required to meet the pupils's needs.

## Writerly knowledge chart

Prior to using a sequence and across the Learning about the text part of the sequence, we aim to create a writerly knowledge chart: initially we do this as teachers to familiarise ourselves fully with the text and then we create a similar chart with the pupils (sometimes referred to by others as success criteria). There are three main reasons:

1. To enable us to engage more deeply with the text
2. To create a chart with the pupils that they can use to support their writing
3. To use as a basis for discussion when evaluating the effectiveness of the writing.

A writerly knowledge chart consists of three columns. The first is our 'Response to the text', the second is 'How did the author do that?'. The third column contains examples of the devices used by the author so that we do not have to go back through the book to find them.

We construct a version of this chart using the first two columns with the class as we move through the Learning about the text phase. Each activity in that part of the sequence will reveal something about the text such as a response to a part of it and how the response was created. By the end of this phase, the chart should be completed.

Below is an example from the text *A Dog's Day* by Rebecca Rissman

How do I feel about the text	How did the author do that?	Examples
<p>A funny story told from two points of view</p> <p>Dog having fun</p> <p>Girl a bit worried</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flip the book over to see the second story</li> <li>• Tell the same events but with characters feeling slightly different about it</li> <li>• Dog causes mischief in the places he goes to</li> <li>• Girl asks questions to find the dog</li> <li>• Some expanded noun phrases to describe the mess left behind</li> </ul>	<p>Big, muddy flower bed, some wet paw prints on the ground</p>

and here is an example from *The Chronicles of Harris Burdick* by Chris Van Allsburg used in Years 5 and 6.

Archie Boy Wonder		
What response do I have to the text?	How did the author make me feel like this?	Examples
<p>Tension/excitement built</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbs describing actions (get lots of this later too when tiny voices appear'</li> <li>• Adjectives describing him including for post modification</li> <li>• Short clipped sentences... leading to v short paragraph</li> <li>• Get the perspective from inside his head...what he is thinking/seeing '</li> </ul>	<p>choked the neck' (fizzing, popping)</p> <p>Pulled helmet down,</p> <p>Palms were wet and gritty</p> <p>His scalp, itchy and sweaty'</p>
<p>Sense of the light of the sun...introduces the image of light which becomes very important</p> <p>Changes to become about the moon...makes reader feel that the moon will be significant</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sun glare behind the pitcher</li> <li>• Tiny sphere of light broke out of the sun</li> <li>• Spun away into the glare</li> <li>• Wonders about how the ball will move in the moonlight (p5)</li> </ul>	<p>It was cool white, not hot yellow like the sun...</p> <p>It would probably sink to the top of some trees and stay there like a stuck balloon</p>

<p>Action and pace built to describe him running and later to create the sense of the ball being hit</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of present progressive tense and later the present participle 'feeling the force of the ball, meeting the counterforce...</li> <li>• Modals listed</li> <li>• Really long sentence punctuated with dashes and commas</li> <li>• 'CRACK'</li> </ul>	<p>'was no following it' He was running hard... 'he could hear people yelling to slow down...' 'he could stroll if he wanted...'</p>
<p>Information about Archie being different gradually revealed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So what if people laughed at him...</li> <li>• Has to go to summer school</li> <li>• 'special ed kids, him..'</li> <li>• He was dickslektic</li> </ul>	
<p>Dream-like feel as he describes the game at night...becomes more dreamlike.  Creates a sense of the tensions in his head</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gradually becomes more unreal</li> <li>• Reveals he has his eyes shut</li> <li>• Introduction of the tiny voices</li> <li>• Unable to speak</li> </ul>	

For both examples, these charts were created before deciding on the elicitation task. Only the necessary sections would be created with the pupils.

### Learning about the text

This phase of teaching sequence is all about becoming familiar with the text that is being used as a model for writing. We are aiming to engage the imagination and emotions of the pupils with the text through high quality talk and activities that deepen understanding.

We then move on to thinking like a writer and exploring and playing with the ways in which the author has engaged us as a reader. Part of this will be focused grammar teaching. We are heavily influenced by Debra Myhill's work on Grammar for writing and follow her four key principles:

- Making links between the grammar being taught and how it works in the writing
- Explain the grammar through examples rather than lengthy explanations
- Use examples from authentic texts
- Build in high quality discussion about the grammar and its effects

### Learning and remembering the text

This is where pupils learn by heart a section of the text or the whole of the text through key events. There are many ways to do this. One way is to map the text by drawing the key events and language features as an *aide memoire* for retelling the text. To this, actions can be added in order to make the retelling memorable.

Other ways of doing this are to use drama and freeze framing. Here pupils could learn the whole text or a part of the text in groups, acting it out and saying it at the same time.

However pupils learn the text, the essential element is that they can retell it. It is particularly important to pay attention to the pupils who find it tricky getting ideas down on paper, lack rich vocabulary and sentence patterns or have few ideas to write about, because these are the groups that this strategy is designed to support.

Where the text is too long to learn in its entirety, summarise it using vocabulary and sentence constructions from the writing.

### Likes, dislikes, patterns and puzzles

These four areas were developed by Aiden Chambers as a way of talking about books without teachers firing off a list of comprehension questions. Pupils are asked to discuss the book in terms of what they like about it, what they dislike, any patterns they have noticed in the text and any puzzles that they have left unsolved. These are best recorded as a class because it is not the writing down of these areas but the discussion around them that is important.

The patterns and puzzles often provide a place to delve further and have follow-up investigations. For example, when reading *The Paradise Garden* by Colin Thompson, one pupil noticed that the frames around the pictures got bigger and bigger as the story went on. Another noticed that there was always something red on each page. These were investigated further and both went on to add to the pupils's understanding of the text.

### Tell me ...

This was a strategy devised by Aiden Chambers to deepen talk about a book. He discovered that saying 'Tell me more about ....' opened up a greater discussion.

We often use this strategy when pupils are developing ideas to write about. When it would be beneficial to provide more detail for the reader, we say 'Tell me more about the forest.' Here we are working on the theory that if a pupil can't say these things, they won't be able to write them.

Often, this phase concludes with mapping the key elements of the text to reveal the text or plot structure.

This whole phase usually takes 5 to 6 days

### Practising writing

This is the phase in the sequence where working as a class, we collect ideas to write and recreate elements of the core text in our own writing. Often at this point schools will provide some form of engaging experience to give the pupils something to write about. This might be something like visiting the beach in order to role play and develop ideas for 'The Disgusting Bag of Chips' based on *The Disgusting Sandwich* by Gareth Edwards. We often make suggestions for the writing at this phase but of course, it is best if you make the content fit the interests of your pupils, curriculum and local area.

You will need to model the collection of ideas, organising them and rehearsing them before writing during this phase.

Shared writing is what distinguishes this phase of the teaching from the others. You will need to model writing the text, often over a number of days. The writerly knowledge chart will be referred to frequently during this phase to encourage pupils to use the ideas. Although you and the class will all be writing about the same content, it is important that pupils do this in their own way.

Another key feature of this part of the sequence is a focus on editing and improving writing so that pupils really explore applying the ideas taught to their writing.

### Independent Writing

Now that pupils have practised writing this sort of text with support, it is time to let go of their hands and give them the time and space to create their own version. At this point pupils use

the pattern of the text but their own content. Pupils need to choose what to write about, either with entirely free choice, or choice within a topic. The more choice the better. Time will need to be provided for pupils to collect their own ideas, develop these ideas and to organise them into the planning format.

At the point of writing, there is no shared writing unless you are working with young pupils. Here for instance, it might be necessary to model getting going with writing in but then leave pupils to carry on and write their own text. For older pupils this will not be necessary.

### Text structure/plot structure

We often show the text or plot structure in a chart with the three phases of writing across the top. This is for ease of production rather than the format that we would necessarily use with pupils. For instance, the format for the text structure of *The Disgusting Sandwich* would be best as a map of the trail rather than a chart. What is important for the pupils is to see the changes from the text model to the new version to support them in making their own changes to the text.

Sometimes we will extract the generic pattern of the text from the text model and work from that as a planning structure. This enables pupils to use the pattern but make up a very different story.

### Evaluating the success of a sequence

You will know if a sequence has been successful because every pupil will have made clear progress from the elicitation task and they will all have produced an engaging, independent piece of writing. Pupils will also be able to discuss the improvements they have made in their own writing. Often when teachers start using sequences, there needs to be a real focus on the quality of outcomes to ensure that all parts of the sequence have been adapted enough and are meeting the needs of the class.

Some common teething difficulties include:

- Sequences are taking too long and therefore outcomes are not completed or are not good enough.  
Consider adapting the sequence by taking out activities and limiting focus, especially in Learning about the text section. Reduce the amount of time taken in Practising writing. Increase the pupils' stamina in writing to ensure they can write at length over shorter periods of time.
- The outcomes are too similar to the model text.  
Review how you have used the text structure element of the sequence. Have you added too much detail so it becomes a word substitution exercise? Do you need to make the text structure more generic? Have you modelled moving away from the model enough in Practising writing? Did pupils have enough time to collect and develop their ideas?
- Pupils are not applying the features taught.  
Have you modelled the use of the key literacy and grammatical features in context during the Practising writing section? Were the grammatical features taught out of context so pupils couldn't link them to purpose and impact? Consider limiting your focus so that you explore key features in depth.

Teachers who have been using sequences for a while find that they are constantly refining and adapting their practice with consequent improvements in outcomes.