Improving standards in writing through developing sentence structure and punctuation

What were your reasons for doing this type of development work?

Improving standards in writing had been identified by Ofsted as an area for development. Our own analysis of children's writing and of Optional Tests writing tasks identified sentence structure and punctuation as target areas for improvement. Having focused on sentence structure and punctuation very successfully in my own Year 5 and 6 class, my ideas were shared, used and developed across the whole school and, through the Lead Teacher programme, with other local schools.

Who might find this case study useful?

- Middle leader
- Senior leadership team (SLT)
- Subject leader
- Teacher

School or setting

- Authored by: Cathryn Wicks
- School: Alverton CP School
- Type of school: Primary
- Local Authority: Cornwall
- Region: South West
- Free school meals: Less than 20%
Key points

Point 1

Much-improved awareness of a range of sentence types has had a positive impact at sentence, paragraph and text level.

Point 2

Focusing on sentence structure and punctuation has had a significant impact on progress in writing.

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What

Intentions

What specific curriculum area, subject or aspect did you intend to have impact on?

- English - writing

How did you intend to impact on pupil learning?

- To improve children's knowledge, understanding and application of sentence structure and punctuation.
- To challenge pupils appropriately and to ensure that all pupils make good progress or better in writing.
- To improve teachers' knowledge of sentence structure and punctuation, leading to improved pedagogy.
What were your success criteria?

70% of pupils improve their writing by two or more sub-levels in a year, as measured by teacher assessment (APP) and end of year results. Comparison of writing before and after shows improved sentence structure for 90% of pupils.

PLEASE NOTE this page has three tabs - click 'Next tab' below or use tabs above to see Teaching approaches and CPD approaches

What information or data did you use to measure progress towards your success criteria?

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes
- Periodic teacher assessment
- Pupils' work
- Test results

Teaching approaches

What did you do? What teaching approaches (pedagogy) did you use to achieve the intended impact?

- Interventions
- Self assessment and peer assessment
- Teaching sequences

Describe the teaching approaches you used

Having decided to focus on improving sentence structure and punctuation with my Year 5 and 6 class, I ensured that this was a daily part of the Literacy lesson, within both the starter activity and the shared and modelled writing. I used a range of different activities and games which linked directly to the genre and / or topic we were currently working on. I got lots of ideas from the invaluable Jumpstart! Series by Pie Corbett, but I also developed my own ideas, many of which are listed on the uploaded document entitled “Sentence Suggestions”. I have also uploaded an example of lesson
planning on writing a character description which I used with my Year 6 Literacy group in the lead-up to the NC Tests. Sentence work appears in blue writing on the plan.

As improving writing generally was a key focus for our school this year, I tried to develop this in other ways too and ensured that I used a range of teaching approaches over a unit of Literacy work. Through peer marking and talk partners the children became very used to sharing ideas and working collaboratively. I sometimes felt that the children were very willing to write but didn’t actually know what to write, so to try to remedy this I introduced an increased range of drama activities. They thoroughly enjoyed taking part in these: freeze-framing, hot-seating, writing in role, improvising, gossiping, interviewing and so on. Their increased knowledge and understanding then gave them plenty of ideas to use in their writing as well as lots of fun! My classroom is also full of different writing prompts and suggestions.

Literacy Intervention Sessions for all children

Having been very pleased with the improved writing within my class, it was decided to implement Literacy intervention sessions for all children in the three classes in Years 5 and 6 for thirty minutes twice a week as part of the timetable for the whole school year. We grouped the children in year and ability groups for these sessions. The three teachers led the following groups: 28 average and above average Year 6 pupils; 14 average and below average Year 6 pupils; 34 average and above average Year 5 pupils (these were also our Literacy groups for the Spring Term when we set the children for Literacy lessons). In addition, we had groups of four or five lower ability and SEN pupils working with our five Teaching Assistants on a separate programme.

The intervention sessions were planned so that each had a specific sentence focus which was informed mainly by the unit of writing we were working on at the time and the children's writing target. The sessions featured a lot of talk and discussion, and tended to follow the pattern of looking at a sentence type or punctuation example (which was linked to the genre being studied and was often cross-curricular) discussing it, modelling an example and then the children having a go themselves. Often, too, a picture was used as a stimulus. The children used whiteboards for their work - there was rarely a "formal" written outcome. A very important aspect of these sessions was what Pie Corbett describes as being a “magpie” – when you hear something that you like, note it down and use it yourself. Consequently, it was important to allow enough time to share what the children had written and they were
always very enthusiastic about doing this. Opportunities were then provided to apply the sentence structures, punctuation, etc. in subsequent Literacy lessons. Having been very successful in Years 5 and 6, this method of intervention was subsequently used for all children across Years 3 and 4.

Sentence Structure as a focus within Literacy lessons.

Sentence structure and punctuation became our focus in Literacy lessons too: different elements became our whole school targets each term, we ensured that some aspect became our starter activity for most lessons and the sentence aspects for shared or modelled writing in whole class teaching were identified in planning. Focusing on sentence structure and punctuation within the shared or modelled writing was a key factor in our improvement. We found that it was very good practice to make a toolkit each day (whether put up in advance, identified by the children beforehand or from the shared writing, or decided on as we went along) of the sentence aspects of the shared writing and we ensured that this was clearly visible to support the children’s independent work.

Self-assessment and Peer Marking

I feel that self-assessment and peer marking are very important in the children’s progress, especially in the subsequent lessons where these strategies were frequently used to identify how the work from the intervention sessions had been implemented. This was developed in several ways:

- Target Setting – the children were very familiar with their individual target for their writing and how to develop and use this in addition to the focus for the day’s writing.
- After completing their independent written work, the children were encouraged to identify where they had used their “Targets” (whether their own individual writing target or one identified as a sentence type to use that day) by putting a “T” in the margin.
- Feedback on how the child was progressing against their target was given verbally and was a feature of written marking, as were the next steps needed to improve.
- Children were given the opportunity to identify their own targets for improvement by identifying what they were pleased with in their writing and what they would like to improve or use in subsequent sessions.
- Self-marking grids were regularly used.
- A very popular plenary activity was to read their partner’s work. This took different forms: verbal feedback; identifying something they really liked to share with the class; “Sentence of the Day”; identifying targets used with a “T” (as described earlier); writing positive comments or giving a suggestion for improvement.
Assessing Pupil Progress (APP)

Our school introduced APP for writing this year and it formed part of the INSET training I led in October. During this session, time was allocated for all staff (Teachers and Teaching Assistants) working in class teams to level examples of their children’s writing using the materials. From that first session, it was felt by everyone how useful APP would be in identifying the next steps for the various groups of children in their class. It was also interesting (though not unexpected) that each team independently identified AF5 (vary sentences for clarity, purpose and effect) and AF6 (write with technical accuracy of syntax and punctuation in phrases, clauses and sentences) as the areas for development in the children’s writing at all levels of ability.

Sharing Good Practice

Finally, as a Year 6 Lead Teacher, I shared our approaches and ideas with two other local schools who implemented many of our practices.

Character Description Planning.doc (DOC-40 KB) Attachments

Sentence suggestions.doc (DOC-41 KB) Attachments

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CPD approaches

What did you do? What approaches to CPD and learning for adults were used?

- Learning conversation
- Lesson observation
- Training
- Work scrutiny

Describe the CPD approaches you used

The Headteacher and I delivered INSET days on improving standards in writing, including training on APP and ways to develop sentence structure and punctuation, as well as looking at other ways to improve standards such as the use of drama and the implementation of Pie Corbett’s Storytelling into Writing. Ideas for different activities were shared.

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We agreed on the standards expected at the end of each year group for different aspects of writing so that everyone had clear guidance for exactly what sentence work was to be taught in each year.

Sentence level work became the focus for the Performance Review lesson observations. As Literacy Leader, I observed sessions of shared and modelled writing with a focus on sentence construction. These lesson observations were a two-way process and coaching was given.

There was a great deal of professional dialogue about improving standards in writing and how to develop sentence structure. Opportunities were provided to share good practice. As a staff, we moderated writing across the school, looking at how it had developed and improved.

Staff from each Key Phase attended LA training on the Renewed Primary Framework for Literacy.

**Action Plan - Improving Sentence Level Work 2008 - 2009.doc**

**What CPD materials, research or expertise have you drawn on?**

- Pie Corbett - Storytelling into Writing (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2)
- Pie Corbett - Jumpstart! Literacy, Jumpstart! Storytelling and Jumpstart! Poetry: [http://www.routledge.com/books/series/Jumpstart!](http://www.routledge.com/books/series/Jumpstart!) (This approach is also advocated in the Talk for Writing (TfW) materials produced by NS on which Pie also worked - see links below).
- LA training on the Renewed Primary Framework for Literacy
- Primary National Strategy Boys' Writing Flyers: [http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/85248](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/85248)
- Assessing pupil Progress (APP) materials: [http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/158217](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/158217)

Other relevant National Strategies resources:

- Talk for Writing [http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/163270](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/163270)
- Support for Writing [http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/102688](http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/102688)

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Who provided you with support?

- Local authority staff
- Middle leader
- Senior management
- Subject leader

How were you supported?

- The Headteacher was fully involved and helped to lead the INSET.
- The whole staff worked together to improve standards.
- The Project Leader attended LA Lead Teacher meetings.

Impact

On pupil learning

What has been the overall impact on pupil learning?

- Children's confidence to write has increased.
- Children are motivated to write, because they are more confident about how to do it.
- Children have a greater knowledge of how to improve their own writing.
Children have a clearer understanding and more control over a greater range of sentence structures and punctuation.

**Examples of Year 6 Childrens Writing.ppt**

**Thoughts you think are relevant to overall impact on learning**

The children enjoyed the nature of the intervention sessions and of the starter sentence activities because they were fun and often game based. All abilities felt confident to challenge themselves and take risks and extend their own work because they were writing on whiteboards and not committing anything formally to paper.

**Quotes you think are relevant to overall impact on learning**

'Practising your sentences before a task nearly always makes a difference to your writing.' – Year 6 pupil

'It made me more confident about what to write and how to do it.' – Year 6 pupil

'It really helps to do a lot of sentence practice.' – Year 6 pupil

'Children's much-improved awareness of a variety of sentence structures has had a very positive impact at sentence, paragraph and whole text level.' – Year 6 teacher

'The children have been able to use their knowledge of sentence structure to inform their voice as a writer and are able to show their individuality because they are better able to express themselves in a variety of ways.' – Year 6 teacher

**Quantitative evidence of impact on pupil learning**

- Periodic teacher assessment
- Test results
Qualitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Logs or interviews
- Pupils' work

Describe the evidence of impact on pupil learning

Interviews with children, as part of Literacy Leader monitoring, showed that children across the school felt more confident to write and that focusing on sentences had helped them with this (see quotes above). APP backed up teachers' judgements that sentence structure had improved, as almost all children achieved well in this aspect of writing assessment. The impact on their writing has been noticed in all subjects where writing takes place, as well as their pride in, for example, getting a semi-colon into their Geography!

NC Tests and Optional Tests in May 2009 showed the following progress in writing for the year:

Out of 176 pupils:

- 8% = no change
- 21% = +1 sub level
- 30% = +2 sub levels
- 27% = +3 sub levels
- 14% = >+3 sub levels.

In addition, through the Lead Teacher Programme, these ideas for improving sentence structure were rolled out over a very short period of time to two other local schools. At School A, the target group of six Year 6 pupils, five of whom were Level 2C at Key Stage 1 whilst one was Level 2B, and all of whom were levelled at 3A in December, all achieved Level 4 in their writing in the Year 6 SATs. In addition, the school's writing scores for achieving Level 4 or above improved by 10%. The Year 6 teacher in School B felt that the impact of the work she had done on sentence construction as part of the Lead Teacher programme had honed the skills of the Level 4 / 5 writers and also helped the children working on the edge of Levels 3 and 4 to achieve Level 4.
On teaching

What has been the impact on teaching?

Teachers are more confident when teaching Literacy because they know how to improve the children's writing using sentence structure and punctuation. They have lots of ideas for activities. The initiatives have been cascaded through the school and to other schools. The technical language of sentence structure has become much more explicit in all age groups and there has been a much stronger focus on the mechanics of sentence construction. A recent SIP report stated that the INSET training provided for all staff by the Literacy Leader and Headteacher had had a "very positive impact" on Literacy teaching in the school.

Thoughts you think are relevant to impact on teaching

Working together as a school, sharing ideas and good practice was very important. Staff knowledge has been enhanced and there is a more shared understanding of what the children need to be able to do at each age group.

Quotes you think are relevant to the impact on teaching

'It has completely changed the way I teach Literacy.' – Year 6 teacher from a Lead Teacher Partner School

'I now have more knowledge of how to improve writing and how to develop sentence structure.' – Year 6 teacher from a Lead Teacher Partner School.

'The emphasis on sentence structure has made me think in more detail about my teaching and has focused my delivery on how to write rather than what to write.' – Year 5 teacher

Evidence of impact on teaching

- Evidence from observation and monitoring
- Evidence from planning
- Teacher perceptions

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Describe the evidence of impact on teaching

Teachers are now much more secure and confident in the delivery of sentence level work. This was evidenced through recent lesson observations of modelled and shared writing with a focus on sentence construction, which reprised a similar set of observations twelve months earlier. Close collaboration (within teams and with the Literacy Leader) for planning and teaching worked very well. Literacy planning shows clearly detailed sentence activities and foci for whole-class teaching. Whole-staff moderation of writing shows clearly what aspects of sentence work have been taught and learned. Lesson observations of the Literacy Leader's PGCE student showed how closely he had taken on her own very good practice within his teaching.

On school organisation and leadership

What has been the impact on school organisation and leadership?

The role of the school's Literacy Leader (and Project Leader) has been strengthened and developed, to include leading whole-school INSET. Her role in this project has helped to further strengthen the school's policy of distributed leadership and she has been able to impact on all levels of leadership from class level through the Year 5/6 team and then across the school. A recent SIP report highlighted the "good professional development for leadership skills" that this work has provided for the Literacy Leader. The Literacy Leader has become a Lead Teacher with the LA and worked with other local schools to improve standards in writing. There has been a whole school approach to the improvement of writing which has included TAs attending training sessions alongside teachers.

 Thoughts you think are relevant to overall impact on school organisation and leadership

The implementation of intervention groups for Literacy has had a significant impact across the school.

Attending the NCSL Middle Management course a few years ago has been important for the Literacy Leader's professional development.
Quotes you think are relevant to overall impact on school organisation and leadership

'Due to the positive way the Lead Teacher has driven Literacy (and writing in particular) across the school, all parties (including the Senior Leadership Team) have been able to play a part in developing the subject across all year groups.' – Deputy Headteacher

'The way that this approach to leading a subject has worked should enable it to be used by other subject leaders across the school.' – Deputy Headteacher

Evidence of impact on school organisation and leadership

Success as a LA Lead Teacher for the Literacy Leader. In house INSET was led by the Literacy Leader and not externally and an increased range of opportunities for staff CPD has been provided.

File Attachments

- [Examples of Year 6 Children's Writing.ppt](#) (ppt 1.1 MB)

Summary

What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

An enthusiastic and knowledgeable leader and the whole school working collaboratively to raise standards in writing.

What key resources would people who want to learn from your experience need access to?

- Key colleagues who will lead the project
- Pie Corbett Storytelling into Writing (Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2), Jumpstart Literacy and Jumpstart Storytelling
- APP materials.
What CPD session and resources were particularly useful?

LA training for the Renewed Primary Framework in Literacy.  
Whole staff INSET on improving standards in writing.

If another individual or school was attempting to replicate this work, where would they start and what would the essential elements be?

- A whole-school approach.  
- A knowledgeable member of staff willing to lead the project.

What further developments are you planning to do (or would you like to see others do)?

The school has recently started to implement the Pie Corbett approach to Storytelling and are going to continue to develop this next year.