

Utilizing the English Raven Writer's Workshop

Overview: Writer's Block

Even touching on the issue of writing in EFL/ESL classes, and young learner classes in particular, can be very much like opening a can of worms. The prospect of writing anything of any length, whether it be a narrative or an argumentative essay, can be a daunting thought even for native adult speakers of a language. When you add younger ages, the fact that you are writing in L2, and the specter of 'assessment', the can of worms can become like a tank of snakes for many second/foreign language learners.

Much of our anxiety about writing stems from the fact that we are focusing on a finished product which, once it is handed in under the knives of an assessor or critical reader, cannot be taken back or undone. For your average EFL/ESL learner, you can add to that stress worries such as "did I use my grammar correctly?" or "I'm not sure if I used the right vocabulary...." Acknowledging the problems associated with regarding writing as a *product*, from the 70s onwards a lot more educators began to focus on writing as a *process*. Writing was seen to be a way of thinking, requiring feedback from peers as well as teachers, and involving a process of editing and re-editing, writing and re-writing. Unfortunately, over-emphasis on the writing process can also distract us from the fact that we are in fact attempting to come up with some kind of product when we embark upon writing something. Balancing process and product in writing is still a hotly debated issue in a lot of the literature on writing as a language skill.

The Writer's Workshop method suggested here is not a miracle cure for the ailments that beset your ESL/EFL young learner writers. It is, however, a method I've found to be quite effective, and it may give you some ideas of your own on how to tackle the "writing dilemma."

First Things First...

The first thing you are going to need to think about is what kind of writing you would like your learners to engage in, and whether it matches both their cognitive and linguistic development up to this point. You need to think about where the inspiration to write about something can come from in the students, and how this can materialize into a clear topic or task.

In terms of 'what kind' or writing to engage in, you may peruse a school-based L1 writing textbook and see tasks there that encourage the students to "compare and contrast", create a "how-to paper", make a "descriptive narrative", or argue in support of an opinion. I've had the experience of being forced to utilize textbooks like these with young EFL learners, and if the results were frustrating enough for me to want to avoid writing subjects in future, imagine how my students felt? It was in actuality a perfect example of (1) getting so deeply into discreet skills and writing processes that the actual act of producing anything meaningful and personal became very much secondary, (2) how explaining 'processes' and writing concepts can end up taking up more EFL class time than the actual act of writing, and (3) why and how many young students get turned off the prospect of writing almost from the get-go.

For me, the best sources of prospective writing material have come from two distinct areas. One has been from actual reading - the stories and themes the students read about in other sections of the curriculum. It may be an over-generalization, but I am willing to bet that the more your students read, the more (and more willingly) they will be able to write. For example, if you've just read a story about an animal character in the jungle, a good writing topic as follow up would be to write a similar story about a different animal character in the same (or at least, same kind of) jungle. The students could be asked to change the story they read, or continue it. From an EFL/ESL perspective, at least they have a nice bank of vocabulary and sentence models to start working with a theme or concept that is *meaningful* to them.

The other ideal source for good writing topics is the actual students, and all the interests, experiences, fears and hopes wound up in each and every one of them. Whenever possible, I draw on this kind of schematic resource to build topic options for the students - topics that come from and out of themselves.

Irrespective of age, try not to design writing topics that seek to exploit particular uses of grammar. Students will not enjoy writing about these topics in the same way that they usually do not enjoy reading those horrid L2 "readers" where stories are whisked up to dress up grammatical functions and so forth. Such stories/topics usually end up feeling contrived and superficial, and enthusiasm for the task (at least in my own experience) has never really managed to impress. Try to stick to themes and concepts, ideas that are real to the students or appeal to their imaginations.

Finding a good topic to write about can be everything, and it is really worth putting a lot of thought into it and getting students involved in the process whenever and however they are willing to do so.

Using Writer's Workshop

The next sections deal with the actual Writer's Workshop materials. The downloadable writing 'kit' actually consists of 8 pages, which has been optimal for me in running writing tasks for EFL/ESL students aged anywhere from 9 to 18, but you should chop or add to the kit as you see fit to meet your class and student needs. The sections move from **task type and planning** through **first draft**, **peer/teacher feedback**, **language development** and finish up with **final draft/product**.



*Writing Workshop pg.1
Task and Pre-Planning
(Notes/Pictures/Diagrams)*

[1: Task Type and Pre-Planning \[Page 1\]](#)

Utilizing a page like this did wonders for my ability to get writing classes going, as well as to avoid a lot of problems later on. Once a writing task has been settled on, it is clearly written into the task box at the top of the page (usually I write the topic out on the whiteboard and discuss it at length with the students, after which they copy it onto their own sheets). If a teacher intends to use this kind of resource more than once (perhaps to even put together a folio of writing work), there is space next to the task to put a number.

The rest of the paper is designed for brainstorming, individually, in pairs or as a whole class, with the objectives of (1) understanding the actual task in detail, and (2) getting some things down that will help the students to start writing, and become a reference to come back to if/when they get a little lost further down the line. There are virtually limitless ways this can happen, according to the style of topic and the learning strategies of individual students.

As an example, for younger learners aged 9-10 (writing about their own pet store) I had the students actually draw the pet store they envisioned having, complete with all the animals they wanted to keep, where in the store they wanted to keep them and in what kinds of containers. Of course, each student also came up with his/her own particular 'décor' and overall theme for the shop. This initial illustration helped the students later in two ways: (1) here (in the planning stage) they actually realized there were vocabulary items they were going to want to write about but didn't yet know, so a column was ruled next to the diagrams they drew and vocabulary items and spelling were filled in; (2) they now had something of a 'roadmap' to refer to that allowed them to get a lot of thoughts down and put it into some kind of visible order - a process which helped them write more fluently and with impressive organization once they were actually into the writing task. With other younger classes who decided they wanted to write stories, drawing the story here first

(even roughly) in some kind of sequence had a huge impact on their ability to structure sequences and descriptions during the writing stage. Remember that young learners have a very much 'here and now' predisposition a lot of the time, and shorter term memories which, if not backed up or supplemented somehow, may fall down - leading to confusion and then apathy about continuing what they started.

For older learners, I use this space for planning that is more diagrammatic, showing sequences of events and vocabulary requirements, main idea headings backed up with notes to provide supporting details for each main idea, etc. While I can't say that I agree with an almost ridiculous over-generalization put forward by a prominent writing commentator in the 1960s (that Oriental people think, and therefore write, in 'circles'), I do concede that the often 'linear' style called for in a lot of academic English writing can cause confusion for Asian students I have taught. Some planning and mapping of ideas and sequences at this stage can go a long way in terms of making the students feel more comfortable once they are actually writing.

I strongly recommend that the planning stage of writing happen in-class with peers and teacher present. It is a time where ideas from other students and guidance from the teacher can be crucial. I have also experienced the situation of having students who become horrendously blocked even when they know an appropriate vocabulary item but can't *spell* it. It's best if issues like this one can be dealt with before students are writing. Another thing worth bearing in mind is that the writing plan belongs (of course) to the students, and if they would like to change it either before or during the actual writing, that should be up to them. It can actually be an effective technique to use for second language learners, because in writing something they may come to a stage where they are really struggling to say precisely what they mean. By going back and adapting parts of the original plan, they may be able to avoid or simplify areas of language that stress them unduly. To confirm students' ownership of their plans and general brainstorming, it is important to comment on, but not grade or assess, the pre-planning work.



Writing Workshop pgs.2-3
First Draft Writing
(allows for teacher feedback)

[2: First Draft Writing \[Pages 2-3\]](#)

These two pages are for writing the first draft. In my own experience, I have generally found that two pages are enough for students on the first attempt, irrespective of age. Younger students may struggle to finish one page, but it's good to allow for those who can and want to write more. For older students, generally they write one to one and a half pages before they start to tire out and lose interest in the task (but there are exceptions, and you should feel free to include as many pages as you think the students may want to utilize). Try not to require page limits over three pages, as you may risk over-burdening the students and deadening their enthusiasm.

I generally recommend letting students write their first drafts in privacy, say at home or in another classroom, or in class with a silence rule. It is important that this initial writing stage be personal and uninterrupted. Younger learners may still need some scaffolding (especially for last minute spelling or vocabulary items), but the sooner you can get learners away from getting someone else to guide their writing and take responsibility for it themselves, the better!

There are columns on these first draft pages to allow for teacher comments and notes, but these should actually be withheld until after the peer feedback process takes place (see below - 3). The space is here for teachers to indicate where problems with content are happening, but also linguistic problems (this is writing, but it could also be seen to be beneficial to also guide them in their use and accuracy of language). Notes jotted here to indicate linguistic 'errors' then become input for the language development entries that are to be made in step 4 (see below).



Writing Workshop pg.4
Peer (Student) and
Teacher Feedback

3: Peer/Teacher Feedback [Page 4]

This is the stage where students' writing becomes 'public' for the first time. It can be a very sensitive stage for students and needs to be handled carefully so as to not destroy confidence. In essence, this stage is not primarily about pointing out what is going wrong, it is all about emphasizing the point that when we write, we write to be *read*. It is no good just the writer him/herself being able to understand what is going on in the writing, and it can be as much about orthography (handwriting!) as it can actual use of language or sequencing of ideas.

If possible, put the students into groups of four (preferably known or friendly to one another) and have them exchange their writing. Peers then rate and comment on each others' writing, pointing out what they like or don't like, what is difficult to understand, etc. There is another point to this exercise that is particularly effective when students are all writing about the same topic. Students, by looking at their peers' efforts, can get valuable input and ideas on how to improve their own production. Beware, because unless it is explained properly, this could be seen as copying!

Peer critics then write feedback notes on page 4, using their L1 or L2 depending on the teacher's wishes in accordance with the students' level. Just be aware that in cases where you are forcing students to give feedback in English when they are not yet capable or confident enough to do so, you may actually be stifling chances for constructive peer feedback. Ensure that students only write here on page 4 and not in the margins provided on pages 2-3. One of the safety mechanisms for self-esteem here is that students can comment on each other, but these comments remain segregated from the writer's actual work. The teacher may scrawl or jot notes across a student's writing, but in the students' eyes the teacher is perhaps the one person in the room qualified and entitled to do so!

Once some peer feedback has taken place, let each student read the notes and then look back over their first draft. They may be able to correct or change some things immediately that they (through their peers) were able to see as needing improvement. After this last piece of editing the first drafts can be handed in to the teacher.

Try to collect up the writing and make editing and feedback notes outside of class time, or at least get the students busy working on another task while you work on their writing. Why? If you've ever written anything even remotely simple and watched as a highly educated person read it right in front of you, you will know the feeling that I like to avoid creating in my students - because for them, watching a native speaker (or a perceived expert with the foreign language) read their work must be about twenty times more intimidating! It's worth avoiding stress in any way you can throughout the writing process.

Begin by reading their work and filling in some comments and advice in the bottom section of page 4. It is best to focus these comments on the writer's content, and how interesting or effective the writing was overall. Whenever and however you can, try to highlight the things the student is doing well, and how they were successful in communicating something to you. Try also to include some simple yet constructive suggestions on how the writing could become better.

Then edit the first draft pages by underlining errors in expression or grammar and including hints and comments in the margins provided. This is a tricky stage for many EFL/ESL writing teachers. How much and what to indicate as being 'wrong'? For many EFL learners, if you were to indicate every mistake you

would very likely turn the page into something that looked like a script for an axe-murder movie. Depending on age and proficiency, I try not to highlight more than 5-10 mistakes. If there is any golden rule here, it is to try and point out the sentences or clauses that I truly do not understand! I try to relate these mistakes to areas of grammar or vocabulary that I know they are working on in other classes, so as to provide links across macro-learning areas. Generally I try to focus on verb endings and tense usage, incorrect usage of pronouns, singular and plural forms of nouns, correct use of adjectives (comparative and superlative), quantifiers, and word order. For articles (a notoriously difficult skill for foreign learners of English), either under-utilized or over-used, I usually explicitly insert or delete them - because it can take literally years for students to learn how to use them properly and this kind of editing does not usually involve tearing whole slabs of the student's writing to pieces. For the five to ten mistakes I want the student to try and rectify, I underline the sentence or clause in which they are located, and circle the word or part that is in need of correction. I may then use an arrow over to the margin to give the student a hint, perhaps by way of example. I also try to point out two mistakes that I am fairly sure the student will be able to self-correct very quickly and confidently, just to make them feel more positive about the idea of editing their own language use. Other teachers can come up with their own criteria for numbers and types of mistakes, but remember that the more you scratch their work to pieces and become obsessed with the production of language as close as possible to native speaker norms, the less inclined students will become to write fluently or expressively. Knowing what to correct and how much to correct are issues that are topics of much debate amongst so-called experts, so I (respectfully!) decline to make a final call on that score. Go with your instincts and experiment until you reach a point where you and your students feel that there is equal emphasis on accuracy and communication occurring. The mistakes that have been indicated in this way become work for the language development diary (below - 4), which precedes the writing of the final draft.

For spelling and punctuation, for me this very much comes down to study experience and age. The longer the student has been studying English, the more fussy I become about it. I try to keep in mind that for younger learners, many of them are usually not using punctuation and spelling well in their first language yet, whereas for older learners we can expect a certain amount of literacy that should make adherence to stylistic elements, spelling and punctuation appear more important and warranted.

One more thing! For both comments about content and explicit error indication, try not to use a red pen. Corrections done in red often make work look 'blood-stained', as if the student's work was attacked by knives and is on its way to bleeding to death. Be constructive in editing, not destructive!

Writing Workshop pg.5-6

Language Development Entries

[4: Language Development Entries \[Page 5-6\]](#)

These pages are described elsewhere on the English Raven site (see *Language Development Diaries* in the Raven's Nest section of the main site). Personally I try to find ways to make all learning areas feature some kind of task that reinforces interlanguage development, but in the case of writing, where students are actively communicating using a medium that allows language to be slowed down and then even held in 'still-time', I think that facilitating 'noticing' in students' own output is particularly appropriate. However (as in all things...), too much of anything eventually becomes too much of something, which is why I only usually require two language development entry pages and 5-10 'errors' to work on.

The process is quite simple - students locate the underlined clauses or sentences indicated by the teacher in the first draft and write them into the 'error' boxes. They then attempt to self-correct these utterances, using help from peers if they want. The teacher informs them as to whether or not the correction was successful. If it was, the teacher signs

the entry to indicate that it is complete. If not, the 'new' error is re-entered as a new mistake, which the student tries to self-correct again. Normally I give the students three opportunities to get it right on their own before I provide them with an explicit correction.

This kind of error correction in a writing activity has some great benefits. For one, it is not over the top. Students do not need to spend excessive amounts of time fixing and re-fixing what may be minor errors in their grammar framework at this stage in their language development. Two, work on errors is almost segregated from the actual writing experience performed in the first draft. Three, the students have done some work on their errors that could help them to write (and feel better prepared for) their second and final drafts.



Writing Workshop pg.7-8
Final Draft / Re-Write

[5: Final Draft/Re-Write \(Product\) \[Page 7-8\]](#)

Using these pages assumes you are satisfied with having the students finish the overall writing task with two drafts, which need not necessarily be the case. It really depends on how close to perfect you want the students' writing to become, bearing in mind that (especially with younger learners) the longer you harp on with something the greater the risk that the students will get bored with it and lose their enthusiasm and 'work ethic.' Remember that young learners' notions of 'correctness' are not the same as adults' - they may simply not see the point in doing the same writing task over and over, no matter how much more accurate it appears to become as a result. You can still work on developing the students' writing skills through the same process, but it would be handy to ensure that you are regularly bringing new themes and ideas to them to write about.

The case may be somewhat different for learners in their teens that may be getting ready for more academic writing tasks. They might benefit from a three or even four draft process. Generally, more formal writing tasks will require a greater number of drafts to perfect the skills required.

Utilizing all of the feedback and error-correction activities they have been exposed to, students can use these pages to write their final work. These pages, once complete, could be attached onto the front of the other work, to emphasize what the work *became* rather than how it started out. If any assessment is to take place, it should be targeted on this work only, as the quality of planning, first draft and editing could be said to be self-apparent in the final product (no doubt there are teachers out there who would disagree with me on this point, and they are free to do so!). In any case, hopefully students have seen the benefits of a building process in writing which helps to create a good final product that they can feel proud of.

[A Final Note about Assessing EFL/ESL Writing](#)

Another potential can of worms here... There are hundreds of proposed models for accurately assessing EFL/ESL writing skills, but I still haven't seen a good suggestion on how to assess young learners' writing other than some vague guidelines on keeping some kind of ongoing portfolio. I grade all of my students' work, using an A+ (for outstanding) through F (you flunked) scale, with C constituting 'acceptable' or 'pass'. I also include comments designed to show students where they need to improve. My general criterion is based on quality of communication, effort, visible improvement since the last task, clarity of expression, and attempts to experiment with new themes and language. As long as I know my students well, it doesn't often go wrong. When you're teaching young learners, the simple things in life are often the best. 😊