

LBRIS

We know  
books

how to  
*Teach  
Writing*

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Harmer

# Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Introduction	v
1 Writing as a process	1
• From the beginning	
• Why learn to write?	
• How people write	
• Writing and speaking	
• Implications for learning and teaching	
2 Describing written text	15
• Different purposes, different writing	
• Differences within a genre	
• Text construction	
• Cohesion	
• Coherence	
• Register	
• Implications for learning and teaching	
3 Writing in the language classroom	31
• Writing for learning	
• Writing for writing	
• The tasks of the teacher in writing	
4 Nuts and bolts	44
• The mechanics of writing	
• The handwriting challenge	
• Teaching handwriting	
• The spelling challenge	
• Teaching spelling	
• Teaching punctuation	
• Copying	
• Sentence, paragraph, and text	
5 Building the writing habit	61
• Building confidence and enthusiasm	
• Instant writing	
• Collaborative writing	
• Writing to each other	
• What to do with 'habit-building' writing	

6	'Worked-on' writing	86
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Process and genre</li><li>• Generating ideas</li><li>• Analysing genres</li><li>• Making a plan</li><li>• Examples of 'worked-on' writing sequences</li><li>• Project work</li><li>• Writing for exams</li></ul>	
7	Responding, correcting, and guiding	108
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ways of reacting to students' writing</li><li>• Ways of correcting students' work</li><li>• Ways of responding to students' work</li><li>• Peer review</li><li>• Training students to self-edit and self-correct</li><li>• Making homework successful</li></ul>	
8	Journal writing	125
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A different kind of writing</li><li>• Journal writing benefits</li><li>• Before, during, and after</li><li>• Teacher journals</li></ul>	
	Task File	136
	Task File Key	145
	Appendices	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Appendix A: Punctuation table</li><li>• Appendix B: Chapter notes and further reading</li></ul>	148 149
	Index	153

# Writing as a process

*This writing business, pencils and what not, overrated if you ask me.*  
Eeyore in 'Winnie the Pooh' by A A Milne

- From the beginning
- Why learn to write?
- How people write
- Writing and speaking
- Implications for learning and teaching

## From the beginning

If mankind, in the form of *Homo sapiens*, can be traced back to 100,000 years ago, then the human activity of writing is a fairly recent development in the evolution of men and women. Some of the earliest writing found so far dates from about 5,500 years ago. It was found in 1999 at a place called Harappa in the region where the great Harappan or Indus civilisation once flourished. There is incomplete agreement about the meaning of the symbols that were discovered. However, when the discovery was made, the archaeologist Richard Meadow stated that the inscriptions had similarities to what became the Indus script – the first recognised written language:



Symbols on Harappan pottery

Since then, many different writing systems have evolved around the world. For example, the following multilingual offers (for translation into the reader's language) give a flavour of some of them:

Osoby ktore by chcialy azeby ten list byl przet umaczony na jezyk Polski so proszone o zaznaczenie kwadratu na prawo. Prosze odeslac list, razem z ta kartka pod adres 44 St Andrews Street, Cambridge. Postaramy sie przeslac tresc listu w przetlumaczeniu na jezyk Polski w przeciagu siedmiu dni.

Bu mektubun Türkçeye tercüme edilmesini isterseniz, lütfen sağdaki kutuyu işaretleyiniz. Mektubu ve bu sayfayı 44 St. Andrews Street Cambridge adresimize gönderiniz; yedi gün içinde mektubu size Türkçe olarak göndereceğiz.

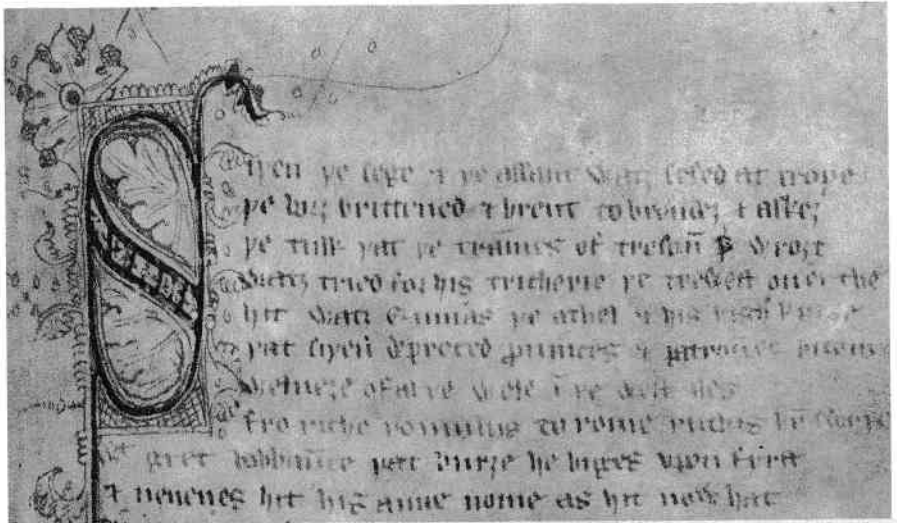
Nếu quý khách muốn lá thư này được dịch sang tiếng Việt, xin vui lòng gạch vào ô bên tay phải dưới đây. Xin gửi lá thư và tờ giấy này đến: 44 St Andrews Street, Cambridge, và chúng tôi sẽ gửi cho quý khách một bản bằng tiếng Việt trong vòng 7 ngày.

如果你想此信翻譯成中文，請於右面方格上劃上一劃，連同此信及附頁寄回 44 St Andrews Street, Cambridge，中文譯本將會於七天內寄給你。

જો તમે આ પત્રનું ગુજરાતી ભાષામાં ભાષાંતર કરવામાં આવે તેનું ઇચ્છના હો તો જમણી બાજુનાં બોક્સમાં નિશાન કરો. આ પત્ર અને આ પાનું અમને 44 St. Andrews Street, Cambridge, એ સરનામે પરત મોકલો અને અમે તમને સાત દિવસની અંદરે અંદર ગુજરાતી ભાષામાં એક નકલ મોકલી આપીશું.

Some of the many translation offers for/in different languages, Cambridge City Council, UK

English writing has changed considerably over the centuries. Early fourteenth-century writing, for example, had significantly different spellings from present-day English and some letters were formed differently too:



An extract from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the fourteenth century

A modern version of written (or 'texted') communication, however, received via a mobile phone, can look like this message. Clearly 'writing' has come a long way – or, has it?!



### Why learn to write?

However long ago writing really started, it has remained for most of its history a minority occupation. This is in part because although almost all human beings grow up speaking their first language (and sometimes their second or third) as a matter of course, writing has to be taught. Spoken language, for a child, is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it, whereas the ability to write has to be consciously learned.

It is only in the last two hundred years or so that **literacy** – that is being able to read and write – has been seen as a desirable skill for whole populations. Before that it was most likely to be used by rulers of church and state only. Too much knowledge was not thought to be a good thing for the majority of the working population. But as societies grew larger and more industrialised, the need for citizens to be able to write and read became vital in order for bureaucratic organisation to be successful. And then it became clear that education (including **numeracy** – as well as literacy) was desirable for the whole population, not just for the efficient running of society, but also for the fulfilment and advancement of individuals. Thus we no longer have to ask ourselves whether writing is a good thing or not. We take it as a fundamental right. As Chris Tribble says in his book on writing, 'to be deprived of the opportunity to learn to write is ... to be excluded from a wide range of social roles, including those which the majority of people in industrialised societies associate with power and prestige'.

But all over the world people are deprived of precisely that right. According to the Canadian organisation WLC (World Literacy Canada), there are at least 875 million illiterate adults in the world, of whom two thirds are women and there are at least a hundred million children worldwide (60 million of them girls) who still have no access to primary education.

Yet education transforms lives and societies and the ability to read, and write, and being numerate gives adults and children a huge advantage over those who are not so fortunate.

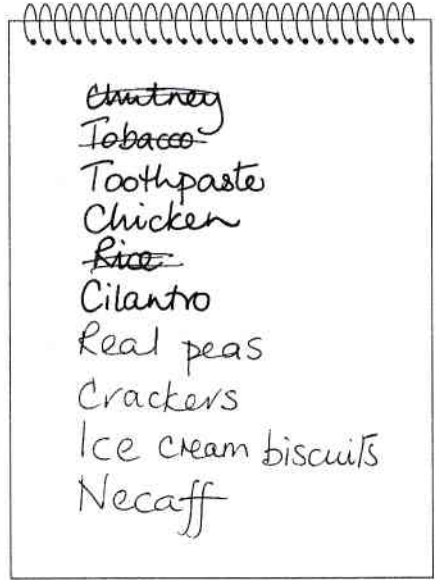
In the context of education, it is also worth remembering that most exams, whether they are testing foreign language abilities or other skills, often rely on the students' writing proficiency in order to measure their knowledge.

Eyore the donkey, whose quote started this chapter, is wrong to say that writing is a waste of time, therefore, even if he does sound like every sulky student who has ever complained! Being able to write is a vital skill for 'speakers' of a foreign language as much as for everyone using their own first

language. Training students to write thus demands the care and attention of language teachers.

### How people write

Because writing is used for a wide variety of purposes it is produced in many different forms. The shopping list below, for example, written over a couple of days as shortages in the kitchen were noticed, is a type of writing that many people (who might not think of themselves as 'writers') do, as a matter of course. A number of features of this list are of interest to us when we consider how people write. In the first place, the writer clearly has an audience in mind for their writing (themselves). In the second place, the writer has clearly changed their mind on more than one occasion, both deleting and adding items on the list. However, this editing of the list has only gone so far: in their haste they have misspelt a word (a brand name) and have not corrected it, seeing no reason to check through their writing (for accuracy). Lastly, it is worth noting the use of a foreign word (*cilantro*), obviously known to the writer. This word would probably not have been used if the list had been written for a general English-speaking audience.



Although this shopping list may not seem to provide an example of sophisticated writing, it nevertheless tells us something about the writing **process** – that is the stages a writer goes through in order to produce something in its final written form. This process may, of course, be affected by the **content** (subject matter) of the writing, the type of writing (shopping lists, letters, essays, reports, or novels), and the **medium** it is written in (pen and paper, computer word files, live chat, etc.). But in all of these cases it is suggested that the process has four main elements:

#### Planning

Experienced writers plan what they are going to write. Before starting to write or type, they try and decide what it is they are going to say. For some writers this may involve making detailed notes. For others a few jotted words may be enough. Still others may not actually write down any preliminary notes at all since they may do all their planning in their heads. But they will have planned, nevertheless, just as the shopping list writer has thought – at some level of consciousness – about what food is needed before writing it on the piece of paper.

When planning, writers have to think about three main issues. In the first place they have to consider the **purpose** of their writing since this will

influence (amongst other things) not only the type of text they wish to produce, but also the language they use, and the information they choose to include. Secondly, experienced writers think of the **audience** they are writing for, since this will influence not only the shape of the writing (how it is laid out, how the paragraphs are structured, etc.), but also the choice of language – whether, for example, it is formal or informal in tone. Thirdly, writers have to consider the **content structure** of the piece – that is, how best to sequence the facts, ideas, or arguments which they have decided to include.

### Drafting

We can refer to the first version of a piece of writing as a **draft**. This first ‘go’ at a text is often done on the assumption that it will be amended later. As the writing process proceeds into editing, a number of drafts may be produced on the way to the final version.

### Editing (reflecting and revising)

Once writers have produced a draft they then, usually, read through what they have written to see where it works and where it doesn’t. Perhaps the order of the information is not clear. Perhaps the way something is written is ambiguous or confusing. They may then move paragraphs around or write a new introduction. They may use a different form of words for a particular sentence. More skilled writers tend to look at issues of general meaning and overall structure before concentrating on detailed features such as individual words and grammatical accuracy. The latter two are, of course, important and are often dealt with later in the process.

Reflecting and revising are often helped by other readers (or editors) who comment and make suggestions. Another reader’s reaction to a piece of writing will help the author to make appropriate revisions.

### Final version

Once writers have edited their draft, making the changes they consider to be necessary, they produce their final version. This may look considerably different from both the original plan and the first draft, because things have changed in the editing process. But the writer is now ready to send the written text to its intended audience.

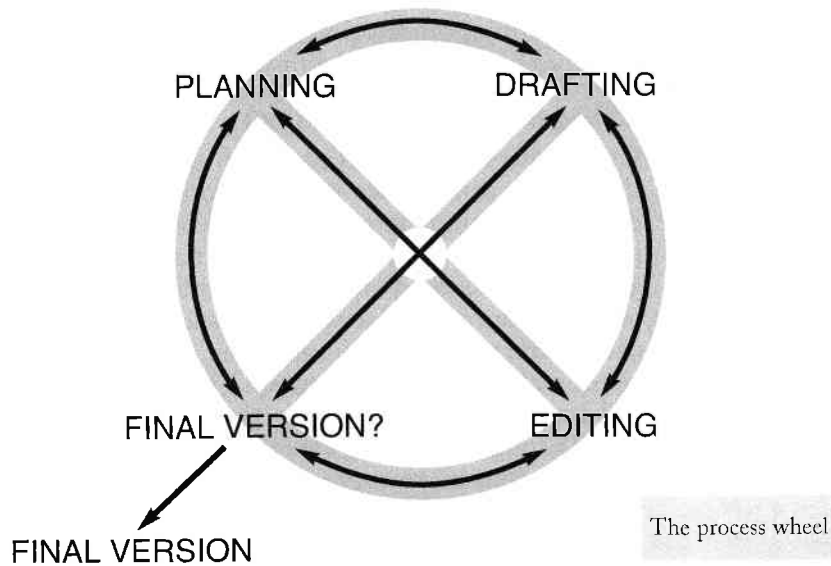
We might decide to represent these stages in the following way:

**planning ➡ drafting ➡ editing ➡ final draft**

However, there are two reasons why this diagram is not entirely satisfactory. In the first place, it tells us little about how much weight is given to each stage, but, more importantly, by suggesting that the process of writing is linear it misrepresents the way in which the majority of writers produce written text. The process of writing is not linear, as indicated above, but rather **recursive**. This means that writers plan, draft, and edit but then often

**re-plan, re-draft, and re-edit.** Even when they get to what they think is their final draft they may find themselves changing their mind and re-planning, drafting, or editing. They may even start – as some novelists do – without too much of a plan, and so their point of entry into the process is that first draft, a kind of ‘stream of consciousness’, that only later through a series of re-plannings, editings, and draftings gradually coalesces into a final version of the text.

We need to represent these aspects of the writing process in a different way, therefore; the **process wheel** below clearly shows the many directions that writers can take, either travelling backwards and forwards around the rim or going up and down the wheel’s spokes. Only when the final version really is the final version has the process reached its culmination.



The writing process we have described operates whether people are writing e-mails, texting their friends, writing shopping lists, providing compositions for their English teachers, or putting together a doctoral thesis. How much attention we give to the different stages of the process (and to recursion in the process) will largely depend, as we have seen, on what kind of writing we are doing, what medium we are using, what the content and length of our piece is, and who we are doing it for. Sometimes the first three stages of the process will take almost no time at all and we will plan, (re-)draft, and (re-)edit very quickly in our heads as we write. Nevertheless, however casually we approach the process, we will still try and plan what to write, check what we have written, and revise it before sending it off. It is just that at certain times we do this more carefully than at others.

### Writing and speaking

When considering how people write, we need to consider the similarities and differences between writing and speaking, both in terms of their forms and in the processes that writers and speakers go through to produce