

Writing for real, purposeful and relevant contexts

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The [Framework for secondary English](#), together with the programmes of study and functional skills in English, all emphasise writing for realistic and purposeful contexts.

What are the benefits?

The focus on real, purposeful and relevant contexts, helps to:

- engage and motivate pupils by widening the range and content of English study
- reflect and support learning in other subject areas
- take pupils beyond the classroom and prepare them for the transition into the next stage of learning and employment
- create greater collaboration, discussion, interaction and dialogue between pupils
- develop thinking and generic problem-solving skills that lead to the independent and creative application of writing skills.

Defining these contexts

The following definitions are based on examples from module 2 of functional skills core training.

Real contexts are:

- grounded within recognisable, real-life challenges and situations, and practical, work-related tasks
- problems with a range of solutions and actual consequences
- connected to real audiences and working environments
- interactive, involving professionals and workers
- linked to the local and global communities.

Purposeful tasks:

- have a clear outcome with achievable goals
- are open-ended pathways in which pupils choose and justify appropriate routes through problems
- lead to feasible and acceptable solutions
- provide opportunities for pupils to select and apply a range of skills.

Contexts are relevant to pupils':

- individual experiences, interests, education, home life, goals, further learning, and aspirations
- needs, which help them to secure new skills and gain qualifications.

Issues and challenges

Once you have defined what real contexts mean to you and your department, you can focus your teaching by collaborating. You can also support planning by with a summary of factors that often affect outcomes.

What to consider

- How do you and your department define real, purposeful and relevant contexts?
- How well do current schemes and plans support this focus?
- What are the challenges you'll face in implementing real contexts?
- What does effective teaching of writing consist of with regard to 'real, purposeful and relevant'?
- What next steps and action do you need to put in place?

Working together

Preparing medium-term or long-term plans for work in real contexts often involves more coordination than for other units and modules. So, you'll probably need to focus on how you communicate and plan ahead with colleagues and departments. A focus on process as well as content is often effective; many teachers use collaborative and problem-solving approaches to help pupils apply their learning independently.

Evaluating outcomes

Evaluating the success of work in real contexts can be complicated by several common factors. So, it's often useful to consider the following when planning.

- A range of outcomes can form a major part of the sequence or set of activities. Some of these will not be related to English or writing.
- As outcomes can occur outside the classroom, you will need to consider how to capture these. What attainment and assessment evidence will you use? How can day-to-day assessment help you get a sense of pupils' writing development?
- A personalised approach to pupils' learning, which encourages independent choices, can lead to outcomes you had not considered or foreseen.

Using real contexts

One real context is professional writing and publishing. You can focus on the business of publishing and writing by looking at the process of 'becoming an author', for example:

- submitting a manuscript
- redrafting
- working to a publisher's brief.

You can also consider presentational considerations (number of pages, cover), format (paperback, hardback, anthology, novella), book cover blurb and promotional materials. You might also focus on teenage fiction. How do publishers know what novels to publish? Do they have specific submission rules, such as no manuscripts longer than 500 pages?

'Commissioning' pupils

Modules in which pupils are treated as commissioned writers can mimic the real experience of writing to a brief. They usually consider:

- attention to detail in a submission or treatment
- the need to provide what the audience or market wants
- redrafting of a structure
- the presentation of ideas to a commissioning editor, publisher or producer.

Cross-curricular contexts

Draw together a range of subject focuses, for example if a group was preparing a charity bike ride they might:

- write letters to sponsors
- record calculations
- keep real or imagined diary accounts
- write evaluations, plans and reports.

Writing for unfamiliar audiences

Compose a range of fictional stories, poems or written pieces to be performed to a live audience from outside the school (for example, primary-school children, parents or invited guests).

Personalised writing

Encourage writing that emerges from pupils' specific personal interests, which might include focusing on biographies of a favourite sports or music star or accounts of events they have participated in. Pupils can also write personal evaluations and reflections on the work they have done.

Using literary texts

Realistic and purposeful writing can emerge from the study of poetry, drama or fiction. Look for opportunities to write in real ways as a response to, or in preparation for, study of literary texts. These ways can include written research and oral presentations that uses written plans. Pupils can also focus on transferring and transforming a literary text into another form, as often happens in real-world contexts (for example, from text to film, novel to script or concept to game).

Online resources

There are many websites that offer real contexts for writing. Here are just a few that you can use to engage pupils in classroom activity and homework.

Publishing

Publishers' websites offer catalogues of published work, which pupils can use to see:

- what sort of books or other resources they publish
- which authors they publish
- what seems popular, and how it's advertised
- who their audience seems to be.

After this investigation, you can ask pupils if they would change their approach to writing in any way, given their new knowledge. You can usually obtain printed copies of these catalogues.

Professional writing

Look at websites of appropriate professional writers and authors'. Often blogs or news can provide insights into the way that writers work too. The [BBC writersroom](#) offers advice on writing submissions, along with writers' blogs. News sites can also have sections devoted to professional writing and writers, such as [Reach for the Sky](#) on Sky.

Creative writing

Creative networking sites for writing (especially for television and film) often provide advice on how to write for a particular market (for example, script formatting).

Commissioning

You can look at extracts from the commissioning area of sites (for example, the BBC and Channel 4). Much of the information is for adults. However, carefully selected snippets can provide an insight into how programmes are made and written.

Related Links

- [BBC Commissioning](#)
- [BBC writersroom](#)
- [4 Producers](#)
- [Reach for the Sky](#)

Supporting independent learning

Independent learning is one of the skills that is developed within English. Find out how independent learning relates to real contexts and how you can focus your teaching when pupils are asked to write for a website landing page.

How independent learning relates to real contexts

Pupils move from dependence to independence when lessons include:

- a range of contexts, including the unfamiliar (helping pupils to apply the skills they have built and developed)
- opportunities for collaborative planning across and between organisations (helping pupils to understand the implications of this).

How you can encourage independence

See how these independent learning skills can be developed when pupils create content for a website, writing a landing or home page.

Integrate prior and new knowledge

A pupil who is planning a landing page for a website might draw on what has already been taught in previous lessons, or learned from their own research about how writers draft and edit their work. They can then absorb new learning about writers' techniques when streamlining and tweaking their writing (for example, changing verbs).

Acquire and use a range of learning skills

Pupils draw on different skills when composing their work, for example how to set out a page so there is an appropriate balance between image and text. They can consider conventions such as how to introduce subject matter or engage a reader's attention. They might also look at using key words if they are writing for a website.

Make appropriate choices about learning strategies

Pupils will make their own decisions about when they need advice in order to continue. They might deploy strategies such as getting a mentor or peer to evaluate their work. They might 'take time out' to reflect on their work, recalling the key objectives of the task. They might choose to print out text from the screen and work on paper, or move from paper to screen. Even if pupils consult you, they make these choices independently.

Cope creatively with the unfamiliar and unexpected

In designing their landing page, pupils might find that the information they develop is not sufficient to 'fill the space'. They might find that the font they choose isn't large to read. The task might change and require rewriting (for example, you, as the 'client', might request a different focus for the text). The task itself might be unfamiliar, offering opportunities to explore creative solutions.

Solve problems individually and in groups

Pupils are often adept at working in groups, taking on different roles such as questioning, empathising, negotiating, and summarising. This is useful when they need to revise something in the light of changes or challenges; while drawing on what they have learned, they are also willing to try new things (for example, a different font, a different form of expression or paragraph order). In this case, the pupils learn to solve problems without worrying that it 'might not work'.

Learn from their successes and failures

Pupils measure what they have done against the expectations of peers or reviewers. They take on board what worked and what did not for future work within this context and, more importantly, for work beyond it.

Accept that learning involves uncertainty and difficulty

Writing can be difficult, especially when pupils have to deploy a range of skills and strategies concurrently. Often they do not find it difficult to select information, but pitching it at the right level for the chosen audience can prove challenging. You can help pupils by creating a culture in which mistakes and difficulties are a stage in learning (not barriers), encouraging pupils to go back over work and redraft.

Related Links

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/commissioning/>
- <http://www.channel4.com/corporate/4producers/>

Action checklist

This list of suggested actions can help you to focus and prioritise your teaching of writing in real, purposeful and relevant contexts. You can also use it to note and set completion dates.

- Review and assess knowledge of real, purposeful and relevant contexts.
- Review sources of support and resources.
- Review long-term (curriculum) plans for real-context opportunities.
- Plan for strengthened real-context opportunities.
- Evaluate short-term or medium-term plans. To what extent do they build independence? What could be added or developed?
- Identify what needs adding or developing in short-term and medium-term plans (for example, more talk about writing skills and strategies).
- Choose an area to research and develop real-context resources (for example, focus on a news reporter or children's author).
- Evaluate how much 'real-life' text is used in the classroom (for example, visits by authors or employers, interviews with business people who use specific reading skills).
- Strengthen the use of real-life text in the classroom where feasible and appropriate.
- Plan a work module that brings together functional skills for reading, real-life contexts, and ongoing English work.

Related Links

- [QCDA secondary curriculum](#)