

## **‘Just writing’ in English For Teachers**

‘Just writing’: an approach to writing designed to give students control of what and how they write, alongside light-touch guidance and intervention, as exemplified in the English and Media Centre’s (EMC’s) *Just Write* workbook.

### **Hypothesis**

Using EMC’s *Just Write* workbook alongside light-touch interventions from teachers can raise students’ writing attainment levels and help them to develop their global awareness of their writing practice.

### **Methods**

This small-scale research uses EMC’s *Just Write* workbook, along with a sequence of 10 lessons developed by the EMC team. It seeks to gain insight into the following research questions in relation to work with Year 7 and Year 8 students:

1. What kind of work does ‘just writing’ produce in English classrooms?
2. Can a ‘just write’ approach improve the quality of students’ writing in English?
3. What is the value of a light-touch teaching structure when approaching ‘just writing’?
4. Can EMC’s *Just Write* be used in ways that develop ‘guild knowledge’ and ‘global awareness’ in English?

It doesn’t aim to reach definitive conclusions, but to explore how young writers respond to a ‘just write’ approach and to draw some tentative conclusions from that in order to develop understanding of writing pedagogy further.

It’s important to note that the *Just Write* workbook was never intended to be used without any teacher guidance or intervention at all; rather it was designed as a space in which students could experiment with their own writing, with only light touch guidance and intervention. It was published in an attempt to give students greater freedom and enjoyment in their writing, and to recognise that becoming a good writer in part involves learning to write in different forms and for different audiences and purposes without the limitations of assessment objectives and writing frames.

The opening stance of the EMC team designing the research is that ‘just writing’ is a valuable pedagogical tool to be used alongside other writing pedagogies. It believes that it is a relatively neglected approach at the current time; hence the desire to research further. The team are also interested to find out the impact of a particular kind of light-touch structure to a ‘just write’ approach, which focuses on self and peer assessment around areas of ‘guild knowledge’ and ‘global awareness’.

The research draws on previous work in secondary English that highlights the complexity of teaching writing and the need for an approach that allows students to develop global knowledge or global understanding. Three papers exploring this further that we would like participant teachers to read are:

Marshall, B. and Wiliam, D. (2006). [English Inside the Black Box](#) (missing pages from link [available at Google books](#))

Sadler, D.R. (1989). '[Formative assessment and the design of instructional systems](#)'. *Instructional science*, 18(2), pp.119-144.

Wolsey, T.D., Lappy, D. and Fisher, D. '[Students' and Teachers' Perceptions: An Inquiry Into Academic Writing](#)', by Thomas DeVere Wolsey, Diane Lapp and Douglas Fisher. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 55, No. 8 (May 2012), pp. 714-724. Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Literacy Association.

You might also read what members of the English and Media team have previously written about this topic:"

Bleiman, B. '[Global Moves and Local Operations](#)' – Big Picture Thinking in English

McCallum, A. (2020) 'Developing one student's writing using EMC's Just Write'. <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/developing-one-students-writing-using-emcs-just-write>

McCallum, A. (2019) 'Writing and the importance of self-regulation. <https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/blog/writing-and-the-importance-of-self->

## Structuring the project

EMC has designed a sequence of 10 lessons for teachers and students to follow. In addition, students will be asked to produce a timed piece of writing before and after the project.

Participant schools will teach the 10-lesson sequence to one Year 7/8 class. They will also use *Just Write* with another class in a way designed by that class's English teacher. Each lesson will be about 30-60 minutes in length. Curriculum time will also be needed for a timed writing tasks before and after the 10-week project.

Participating schools will have the option to continue using *Just Write* beyond the 10-weeks for a further 10-weeks, with teachers meeting with the EMC team to decide how to move the teaching forward.

A member of the EMC team will meet with participant teachers before and after the project and once while it is running. This will either be on Zoom or face-to-face. The team will also be on hand to discuss anything about the project while it is ongoing.

Participating teachers will be asked to identify five students from their class before the project starts. These should represent different attainment levels and different prior levels of engagement with writing in school. The work produced by these students will be scrutinised in detail. Identifying them beforehand means that the research cannot be accused of cherry-picking good work for analysis.

In addition, the EMC team would like to interview participating teachers before, during and after the research, interview students if possible and provide questionnaires for all students taking part.

## **Research ethics**

The English and Media Centre recognises that it has a commercial interest in promoting a *Just Write* approach. As the publisher of the *Just Write* workbook, it generates income from any sales. However, as a charity, EMC is committed to promoting socially just and equitable forms of English teaching. It sees *Just Write* as being part of this commitment.

The teachers taking part in the project do not have a financial interest in EMC or in taking part and will be given the opportunity to comment on any work that emerges from the project before it is published.

Any students taking part will be anonymised in any sharing of their work beyond the school.

Participating teachers will agree to give the EMC team permission to access students' work and to use it in any wider sharing of the project.

## **Assessing the project**

The project takes a qualitative approach, so will look to draw broad conclusions that can be placed within the context of wider, more substantial research. It will gather data through:

- Interviews with teachers and students
- Sampling students' 'Just Write' books and their school exercise books
- Comparing timed pieces of writing produced by students immediately before and after the 10-week project.

# **‘Just writing’ in English**

## ***For Students***

### **Lesson 1**

#### **Welcome to *Just Write***

*Just Write* is a workbook designed to put you in charge of your writing. You choose which task you want to do and how you want to approach it. You’re going to use it in ways that will help you to improve your writing by:

- Thinking hard about what great writing looks like
- Practising your own writing without having to worry about your teacher marking it
- Sharing your work with your classmates and thinking about each other’s work.

#### **Just Write: what different types of writing can you spot?**

- The first thing you should do is put your name on the front of the book.
- Now flick through the book with a partner and talk about:
  - Which activities you most like the look of
  - How many different kinds of writing you can spot that the book gives you an opportunity to have a go at. Try to find at least five.
- Share your thoughts as a whole class.

#### **What makes a great writer?**

- Discuss how important each point on handout 1 is to making a great writer. Rank them from most to least important.

#### **Free writing**

Free writing is a way of writing designed to get ideas down on the page, without having to think about the mechanics. You start writing about anything at all and keep going, never taking your pen off the page and trying not to stop. If you run out of ideas, you just write about something else that comes into your head.

- Try free-writing for 3-5 minutes. You can write to a topic provided for you by your teacher or about anything that comes into your head. You should do this on a separate piece of paper, or in an exercise book, but not in your copy of *Just Write*.
- Discuss your experience of the free write in a small group and share your thoughts with the whole class.

#### **Choosing a piece from *Just Write***

- Choose an activity from *Just Write* that you would like to try. You shouldn’t choose ‘Go Graphic’ on pages 76-77 because that doesn’t allow you to practise your writing. Also, don’t choose any of the poetry or drama activities at this point. There will still be loads to choose from.
- Now, with a partner, discuss how you would complete your chosen task. As well as saying what you would write about, you should also talk about how you would make sure you had enough to write about, how you would plan your writing, and so on.
- Make a note of this activity so that you can try it in your next *Just Write* lesson.

## Lesson 2

### What are your strengths as a writer?

#### Great writing: what are your strengths?

Last *Just Write* lesson you thought about some of the qualities of great writing. This lesson you are going to apply those qualities to your own writing.

- Working in a small group, discuss the different qualities on handout 2. They have been grouped together into four areas. Which are you particularly good at? Which do you need to develop further?
- Give yourself a mark out of 5 for each area, with 5 being the highest.
- Discuss as a class what you might do to improve on any of these areas.

#### Having a go at 'just writing'

- Find the task in *Just Write* that you identified last time you used the book.
- In groups, discuss how you might approach each of your tasks, e.g. what you will write about, how you will plan, etc.
- Now have a go at 'just writing'. Make sure you have some spare paper to hand so you can make notes and a plan before you start. You might even do a 'free write' to get you going.

## Lesson 3

### Reflecting on your first attempt at *just writing*

- In threes, read each other the pieces of writing that you tried out in your last *Just Write* lesson.
- Discuss what you like about each other's work. What are your different strengths as writers?
- Now discuss what you would each like to work on in order to become even better at writing.
- Finally, look back at handout 2, 'What a great writer knows about', that you completed last lesson. Do you still agree with the marks you gave yourself? Has anything surprised you about what you wrote last lesson?

#### Planning a *just writing* task

- Choose a new task in *Just Write* (as before, avoid Go Graphic! and poetry tasks).
- In a small group, discuss the different examples of note-taking / planning on handout 3. Discuss what each writer has done and how it might help them when they start writing.
- Have a go at doing some note-taking / planning for your chosen *Just Write* task. You can borrow from the examples or work in a way that is entirely your own.
- Finally spend about 20 minutes *just writing* the task you have planned.

## Lesson 4

### Purpose, audience and form

How well do you write with purpose, audience and form in mind?

- In threes, discuss the different tasks you have tried in your books so far. What different forms of writing have you all tried out? Have you kept to similar forms (e.g. all short stories, all persuasive writing?), or have you experimented with writing in different forms?
- Apply the criteria about purpose, audience and form on handout 2 (also reproduced below) to your work. How well have you each done? What do you each have to work on further?

### **Purpose, Audience and Form**

A great writer knows exactly why they are writing something – their ***purpose***. Perhaps they are trying to entertain their readers, or instruct them about how to do something, or persuade them to a particular point of view.

They also know how to write in different ***forms***. So they will adapt their writing depending on whether they are writing a letter, or a speech, or a short story.

As part of this, they keep in mind their ***audience*** – who they are writing for.

### **Choosing a new form to write in**

- Still in your threes find a task in *Just Write* that you have not tried that require you to write in a form you have yet to use. To write in this form, what do you have to do differently compared to the writing you have done already?
- Now have a go at *just writing* the task you have picked out. As always, make sure you have some spare paper to scribble down ideas and a plan.

## **Lesson 5**

### **What's good about your writing?**

#### **Assessing your writing strengths**

- Remind yourself of the three *Just Write* tasks that you have had a go at so far. As you are reading through them, think about what you like about your writing. What's good about it?
- Now complete handout 4 to assess how good you are at different aspects of writing.
- Discuss your marks with a partner and then decide if you need to change them in any way.
- Finally, tick one or two of the boxes in the right-hand column, so you can identify what areas you want to focus on to make your writing even better.

#### **Writing with a focus**

- Choose a new *Just Write* task. As you are planning and then writing, keep in mind the area or areas you identified to focus on when you looked at handout 2.
- At the end of the lesson, read your work back through. How successful were you at developing your area or areas of focus? What do you need to do further?
- Discuss as a whole class any examples of immediate improvement that you have noticed in your work.

## Lesson 6

### Focusing on structure

#### Reflecting on handout 2 – what you're good at

- With a partner, read through the writing you did in your last *Just Write* lesson.
- Talk to each other about what you identified on handout 4 as something you wanted to work on. Ask your partner to talk about how successful they think you have been.
- Discuss with each other what you can do in your next bit of writing to get even better.

#### A focus on structure

- Still with your partner, choose one piece of writing each from *Just Write* that you are going to focus on.
- Use this check list below to think about how you structure your work.
- Share good examples of structuring work around the class. E.g. share a good opening or conclusion; describe how a piece of writing moves through a sequence of paragraphs.

The start of my work draws the reader in and makes it obvious what kind of writing they are about to read.
My work is set out in clear paragraphs.
My paragraphs move from one to the next in a logical and clear fashion.
The end of my work ties up any loose ends (unless I'm writing a story that wants to keep the reader guessing!)

#### ***Just write!***

- Choose a new *Just Write* task and have a go at planning and writing it.
- Keep a close focus on how you structure your work as you are going.
- When you have finished, share your work with a partner. Discuss how you have structured your writing, using the examples from the box to help you.

## Lesson 7

### What stands out in your work?

#### What stands out?

It's tricky to identify exactly what we mean by originality, imagination and creativity. One way is to think of all three qualities as referring to something that stands out from the crowd. It involves thinking differently and writing in a way that might surprise or impress a reader.

- Working in a small group, flick through your *Just Write* books and identify a whole piece of writing, or an extract from a piece of writing that you think shows

originality, imagination or creativity (and perhaps all three). Discuss why these pieces of writing have these qualities.

- Share your discussions around the class.

### **Writing with originality, creativity and imagination**

- Choose your next *Just Write* task to work on.
- As you are writing, be thinking about whether this is a piece of writing where you can try to be original, or to use your creativity and imagination.
- When you have finished, read your work to a partner. Discuss together whether or not you think your work is original, creative or imaginative in any way.

## **Lesson 8**

### **Putting it all together**

#### **Self-reflection – looking back over your work**

In your previous *Just Write* lessons, you've been asked to reflect on and talk about an aspect of your writing before moving on to the next task.

This lesson, we're going to see how you can get on without first talking about your work to anyone else.

- On your own, spend a few minutes flicking through the work you have done so far and think about what you have been trying to develop in your writing. You can refer back to handouts 1, 2 and 4 if this helps.

### **Putting it all together**

- Choose your next *Just Write* task to work on.
- Try to really focus on what you were thinking about when reading back over your work.
- When you have finished writing, share around the class what you were focusing on and how successful you were at putting it into place.

## **Lesson 9**

### **Setting the criteria for good writing**

#### **What makes a good piece of writing? Your ideas**

- In groups of three, make up a list of five criteria that make good writing. You can use ideas explored in previous *Just Write* or come up with something completely new.
- Flick through your books and discuss how well different pieces of work meet the criteria you have set.
- Discuss what mark out of five you would give yourself for each criteria.

### **Working with your best piece**



- On your own, identify the piece of work that you are most pleased with out of the different ones in *Just Write* that you have completed.
- Share it with your group, and discuss how you could make it even better if you were to redraft it. Use the five criteria you made up to help you.
- Start writing up your work in best on a fresh piece of paper. Remember, this does not mean just writing it out neatly, or correcting any mistakes. It means making it a better piece of writing. (You might need extra time to finish this task. Your teacher might set it for homework, or give you some additional lesson time.)

## **Lesson 10**

### **Showcasing your writing**

Your teacher will let you know how you are going to showcase your redrafted examples of the writing that you have all been doing. They might choose one of these ideas, or something completely different:

1. Display your work on the walls around the class, so that you can walk around and read what everyone has done.
2. Put your work together in a booklet for display in your classroom and your library.
3. Arrange for each of you to be filmed in turn reading your work out. Watch these recordings in class. You might like to spread out your viewing over the course of a few lessons.
4. Get together in groups of 5 or 6 and read your work out loud to each other.

However you share your work, make sure that you have the chance to:

- Explain what you really like about your own work
- Let other people know what you really like about their work.

## **Handout 1**

### **What makes a great writer?**

Discuss how important each point on the handout is to making a great writer. Rank the points 1-8, from most to least important.

Aspect of a great writer	Ranking from 1-8
You can come up with great ideas before writing so you have something worthwhile to say	
You can put your ideas together into a clear plan so everything is in order and makes sense	
You know exactly why you are writing something – is its purpose to entertain, persuade, instruct, etc.?	
You can adapt your writing for different forms – be it a speech, a story, a letter, etc.	
You know your audience well – exactly who are you writing for?	
You can structure your work so it is logically sequenced from beginning to end	
You know how to make all the bits of your writing hold together and make sense – this includes knowing how to use punctuation, paragraphing and linking ideas together	
You know how to make your work stand out from the crowd – you can use your imagination and creativity to make your work original	

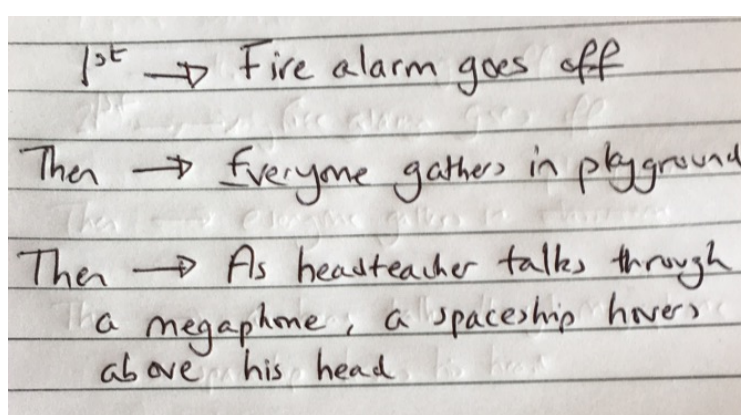
## Handout 2

### What a great writer knows about

What a great writer knows about	Mark out of 5
<p><b>Ideas and planning</b></p> <p>A great writer knows how to come up with <b>ideas</b> before writing so that they have something to say.</p> <p>They can then put these ideas together into a clear <b>plan</b> so they say everything in an order that makes sense.</p>	
<p><b>Purpose, Audience and Form</b></p> <p>A great writer knows exactly why they are writing something – their <b>purpose</b>. Perhaps they are trying to entertain their readers, or instruct them about how to do something, or persuade them to a particular point of view.</p> <p>They also know how to write in different <b>forms</b>. So they will adapt their writing depending on whether they are writing a letter, or a speech, or a short story.</p> <p>As part of this, they keep in mind their <b>audience</b> – who they are writing for.</p>	
<p><b>Structure + cohesion</b></p> <p>A great writer knows how to <b>structure</b> a piece of writing so that it makes sense from beginning to end. They grab the reader's attention at the start and keep it all the way through.</p> <p>They also know how to make all the bits of their writing hold together and make sense. This includes knowing how to use punctuation, paragraphing and linking ideas together – giving their writing <b>cohesion</b>.</p>	
<p><b>Originality, creativity and imagination</b></p> <p>A great writer knows how to make their work stand out from the crowd, making it <b>original</b>. They can use their <b>imagination</b> to come up with great ideas and they use language in <b>creative</b> and interesting ways.</p>	

### Handout 3

#### Examples of planning / note-taking



"That was the day the aliens arrived at the school"

(? 1st or 3rd ??) the. Normal day. Who sees the aliens.

Teacher's p.o.v. — really planned to have day disrupted.

Maybe tell it backwards?

disrupt normal boring day.

1 "That was the day"

2a teachers in staffroom. — See the aliens coming. Scared. Big pause at school — only teacher.

3a playground needs to tell students (? primary) what to do.

4 BUT children already playing with 'aliens' who are humans → }.

2b Unless also do stuffs in pov to the children. So we know already playing.

Who are the aliens? What do they want?

What if school is on a dif planet +, aliens are humans. (Too muddled maybe).

Don't describe the "natives" or aliens till right at the end.

Write it for children! With a message — ? environment or equality or something.

Opening: Blinding light  
Scanning the classroom

Conflict: Running outside  
Aliens on the roof.

Cliff-hanger / start of climax: Teacher charging  
Cocktail in Sports hall  
Colour.

## Handout 4

### My writing – what I’m good at

- Give yourself a mark out of 5 for each of these statements in relation to the three *Just Write* tasks you have done so far.
- Talk about your marks in your group, then identify one or two you will work on in your next piece of writing.

Statement	Mark out of 5 (5 = highest)	Tick one of two to work on
<b>Ideas and planning</b> I’m good at coming up with lots of ideas to include in my writing and using them in a plan.		
<b>Purpose, Audience and Form</b> I’m good at getting and holding my audience’s attention. I’m good at making sure my writing fits the required form (so is it a letter, a speech, a story, and so on); and I’m good at making it clear exactly what my writing is for (its purpose).		
<b>Structure</b> I’m good at getting started with my writing, writing in clear paragraphs, and finishing my work off.		
<b>Cohesion</b> I’m good at reading my work back as I’m working, so that I can change small bits, or add in missing words and punctuation.		
<b>Originality, creativity and imagination</b> I’m good at using my imagination and thinking hard to come up with original ideas. I’m then good at writing these in creative ways.		