

Able Writers in Your School



**Developing the Potential of Gifted Children
in Primary Schools:
A Practical Guide for Teachers**

Brian Moses and Roger Stevens



Brilliant Publications

Contents

Title page
Publisher information
Introduction

Able writers

Getting Started: Poetry & Prose
Getting Moving: Mainly Poems
Getting Ahead: Mainly Prose
Endword

Bibliography
Index of Poetry & Prose
School Acknowledgements
Also Available

Able Writers in Your School

Developing the potential of gifted children
in primary schools:

A practical guide for teachers

*'...the growth of our imagination
is central to the growth of our intelligence.'*

Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate



by Brian Moses and Roger Stevens



Brilliant Publications

*For Paul Chandler, Head Teacher of St. James' CE Junior School, Tunbridge Wells,
with thanks for his support and encouragement.*

Published by Brilliant Publications
Sales and despatch:
BEBC (Brilliant Publications)
Albion Close, Parkstone, Poole, Dorset BH12 3LL, UK

Digital Edition converted and published by
Andrews UK Limited 2010
www.andrewsuk.com

e-mail: brilliant@bebc.co.uk
website: www.brilliantpublications.co.uk

Unit 10, Sparrow Hall Farm, Edlesborough, Dunstable,
Bedfordshire LU6 2ES, UK

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Written by Brian Moses and Roger Stevens

Cover and inside illustrations by Brett Hudson

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Introduction

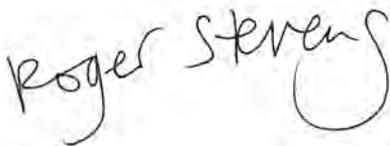
What an 'able writer' is and why we wrote this book

Many children have a real ability for writing. Not only are their technical skills well developed, but they also have a flair for taking risks with their writing. They are capable of stretching their imaginations, making connections and looking at things in different ways.

Able writers are children who have probably read a lot and absorbed much and who can use all this as a launch pad for their own ideas – not just regurgitating the plot of last night's horror film, but finding a new slant and taking a different perspective that is often totally original. We all know these children and at times feel in awe of them. Were we capable of doing what they do when we were their age?

These are the children who won't put their hands in the air to ask, 'Is it all right if I put this, Miss?' They will quietly and confidently take an idea where they want to take it. If there is a framework for a piece of writing, they will quickly see its limitations. Sometimes they will adapt the framework and bend it in the direction they want to go. On other occasions they will simply abandon it and yet still show that they understand the intention of the lesson. It is this ability to surprise the teacher that makes working with able writers so exciting.

This book is designed for teachers who want to develop the potential of their gifted pupils. It passes on ideas and practical advice, including lesson plans and examples of children's work, which we have found to work well with the groups of able writers that we have taught over the last few years. As writers, we often work with groups consisting of children from different schools who come together for a day. For more about the Able Writers Project, see our Endword.



Note: the poem on page 5 is a superb example of the kind of work able writers can produce. It is essentially a first draft produced by an eleven year old.

The Firework Girl

by Emily

The firework girl is what she is,
just waiting to explode.
Everything about her is a firework.

Her brain is a green and silver one,
It whirls around a Catherine wheel,
Always full in for a chance to grow and grow until...



an idea pops out of the cycle completely and utterly unique.
Her brain is a green and silver one.

Her temper is another thing, a red and gold rocket,
Soaring upwards always at a peak ready to shoot and spin up and up,
Waiting for someone or something to really set her off then...



Whoever set her off is in for a dreadful, frightful, terrifying shock!
Her temper is another thing, a red and gold rocket.

Her friendliness is a blue and purple sparkler,
Bright and fizzy with light.
Dazzling brightly waiting to meet with someone to ignite,
But a lot of people are buckets of cold water,
Evil as they douse and



There's nothing left to fizz,
No friendliness left.
Her friendliness is a blue and purple sparkler!

Her dramaticness is a multicoloured one completely bonkers,
Sparky, beautiful and totally believable,
With bits and pieces everywhere it's a display of madness,
and of beauty and intelligence bright and emotional,
Because as she goes on stage she is the firework,
She is the character she is performing
And then...



Her dramaticness is a multicoloured one completely bonkers!

So you see her life is a box of amazing stunning extraordinary fireworks and
Bright funky flashes,
Just waiting to explode!
So stay away, beware this box is highly dangerous,
Who knows what will



Getting Started:

Poetry & Prose

Redrafting	7	Warming up	11
Some essentials	7	Some useful techniques	11
Response partners	8	<i>Make your confession</i>	12
The teacher's input	9	<i>Total mega embarrassment!</i>	13
Clichés	10	<i>Feeling frightened</i>	14
Use of adjectives	11	<i>Crossing the river</i>	17
		<i>Poems for two voices</i>	20
		<i>Dreams</i>	21
		<i>Strange hobbies</i>	22
		<i>A special place</i>	23
		<i>Your worst journey</i>	24
		<i>Pirates</i>	25
		<i>Teacher for sale</i>	27
		Freestyle writing	28
		<i>Imagine a person</i>	28



Redrafting

Some essentials

Redrafting is a process that children quite often find difficult. Teachers sometimes find it hard to give them the help that is crucial to honing a piece of work from something good into something excellent.

There are a number of things that we're looking at when we try to help a child with a piece of writing. For example: Does the writing really communicate the child's ideas to the reader? Does a poem maintain a consistent rhythm? More obviously, is the spelling and punctuation correct? (Spelling and punctuation are less important in the early stages of a piece of writing when we are concentrating on creativity, helping a child to get her ideas from her head onto paper, but these more prosaic matters become important when it comes to the final draft.) How is the sound of the words and the way the piece flows? Are there words that interrupt the flow? If so these might simply need taking out.

All writers, when they've worked hard at something, are usually dismayed at the idea of losing words or even whole sentences. It is important that able writers learn that what is being taken out can be as crucial as what is left in when it comes to perfecting a piece of writing. Knowing what should stay and what should go is the essence of editing, and it's useful for children to learn that while they should be able to edit their own work, the contribution of others can be just as valuable.

We always tell children that our wives look at our poems before they go to our publishers. We explain that when you write a poem, you're often too close to it, too protective of it, and you need someone else to stand back and look at the piece in a less emotional way.

Quite often your critic will say she likes particular words, but then she'll point out a phrase that she doesn't like or she thinks doesn't quite fit. This can be a line that you really like and are desperate to keep in. When this happens to Brian he heads off for his office to sit and sulk. Roger always argues the point. But quite quickly we realise that our partners are right and it is our obstinacy that is holding back the completion of the poem.

Children find it interesting to know that writers of novels, too, have to suffer the indignity of having whole sections cut by their editors, who also often demand complete rewrites. It's not uncommon to have to rework almost a whole novel. When you're talking about rewriting several months' work you can imagine how that feels. But the best writers – the ones your pupils probably enjoy reading – will know that ultimately it is for the novel's good. An experienced editor will usually be able to see things that you can't, weaknesses of plot for example or flabby prose. Professional writers soon learn not to be precious about their work.

Response partners

Able writers are capable of acting as 'response partners' and this can be of real value in helping children to look critically at each other's work.

When organising groups of response partners it is often best if children keep to the same partner. This can lead to the development of mutual trust. Children should understand before working together that their responses to another's work should be considered carefully and offered in a positive way which will help improve the piece of work and not just criticise it. As writers themselves they should be reminded that negative criticism is very rarely of any use.



Give children a step-by-step plan. Ask them to read each other's work through, reading silently at first and then aloud to each other. These readings will often reveal any problems with the flow or rhythm of the pieces. Suggest that the first response should always be one of encouragement, they should try to find something they like, a line or a word, and mention that before anything else.

After praising their partner they can begin the more constructive criticism: Is there a line that doesn't quite fit? Does it need to be scrapped or could it benefit from a little rejigging? Are there dull words that could be replaced with more interesting or ambitious ones? Is the same word used too many times? Does the piece sound good when it is read aloud or can anything be done to improve it?

Once this process has been followed, then the two children involved should get together with their teacher and talk about each other's work. To start with, this discussion will almost certainly be teacher-led, but as children become more experienced critics they will begin to display more initiative.

The teacher's input

Of course, the rules are the same and you must practise what you preach: Start with encouragement for a good word, an interesting phrase, a clever idea. This will make it easier for the writer to accept that there is still work to do. Similarly, always finish with a word of encouragement – 'Once you've sorted that out then this will be a really good piece of work.' An atmosphere of encouragement and of mutual respect for each other as writers is of vital importance.

Another factor to emphasise is that the writing isn't being changed because it is wrong. It is rather a matter of sifting through words and ideas to find those which are best. Some parts that are rejected initially may well be reinstated later on – either in this piece of writing or even in another. For this reason discourage rubbing out and try to insist on crossing out. If a child is working on a computer, get her to save the first copy and work on a second.

Look for those words and phrases that could be trimmed, perhaps because they mean the same thing or because they spoil the flow of the writing. Perhaps there are better words that might be used. Ask the children to suggest what these might be. If children are shown how to use a thesaurus they may find words which convey more precisely the feeling they are trying to communicate. Sometimes words sound particularly good when used together and techniques such as alliteration can be discussed and employed to good effect.

Clichés

Discuss whether something is a cliché. Clichés are lazy writing, they are words and phrases that have been used far too many times. As writer and broadcaster Clive James once wrote in his *Observer* column: '...the essence of a cliché is that words are not just misused, but have gone dead.'

So help the children to look for clichés, for example *the dog was barking his head off*, *cotton-wool clouds*, *white as a sheet*. Talk about what makes them clichés and how they can be replaced or at least freshened up. There are one or two exercises you could try with your writers later in this book. It's also worth remembering not to be too hard on the children here.



Although you will recognise a cliché – your writers will not have read as much as you, nor will they necessarily have come across some of these phrases before. Even if a description has been in use for many, many years, the first time you read it, it is new to you!

For more on clichés, see page 127.

Use of adjectives

All through their school lives, and rightly so, children are encouraged by their teachers to make use of as many different adjectives as possible. This can lead to children going completely OTT! You sometimes have to hurdle a whole list of adjectives to reach a noun – the silent, spooky, sleepy, eerie, gloomy graveyard. Frequently the adjectives will work against one another, or mean the same thing, eerie/spooky, for example. Point out how one carefully selected adjective is often far more effective.

Warming up

Some useful techniques

We're used to seeing sports people and performers warming up. Footballers skip up and down the touchline before coming onto the pitch; athletes stretch and bend; singers test their vocal cords with a scale or two. With our 'able writers' groups, where the children are sometimes strangers and feeling a little apprehensive, we use the following warm-up exercises to create a positive, can-do atmosphere in the group. But they are also suitable to use if you are planning a long session with any group of children. They help to get the mind in gear. Additionally, these exercises can be extended and used as full-scale lessons in their own right.

- *Make your confession*

Tell the children that you are going to confess to something you've done in the past. For example: *When my granddad came to stay he left his false teeth in a glass of water in our bathroom. I picked them up to look at them but the glass slipped from my grasp and the teeth fell into the toilet bowl. I fished them out and gave them a quick rinse before putting them back in the glass. I meant to tell him in the morning but I overslept. By the time I got downstairs, Granddad was eating his breakfast!*

Confessions like this can easily become the starting point for stories and children can be encouraged to think of their own examples. Have any of them escaped punishment by hiding the evidence of an accident, or by blaming a sister, brother, friend, dog or cat?

My Confession

by Emily

Can you keep a secret?

Good!

Okay, here goes.

It wasn't Andrew who let the rabbit out,
even though I said it was, I lied.

I let Silka out because she looked so alone and sad
left in the class during break time.

So I liberated her, let her run wild and free.

Then the bell rang, which meant trouble for me.

We came in and she was sitting on the desk chewing up our
homework.

The teacher said, "Who did it?"

And I blamed Andrew Slater.

But I felt guilty and really bad!

So there you go, I've told you now, so I hope you can keep a
secret.

My Confession

by Anna-Leigh

It was 2 in the morning and I went downstairs for a glass of milk. That's when I saw them – the chocolates that my dad got my mum for her birthday. It was tempting so I took them down and ate seven of them. There were three left. In the morning we were all downstairs and my family found out that seven were missing. As we all turned round my brother got tempted and nicked a chocolate. We all saw him and he got the blame.

- **Total mega embarrassment!**

Similarly, embarrassing moments can be turned to good use. Ask the children if they can remember a time when they were really embarrassed. Tell them you mean not just red-faced, shuffle-your-feet, change-the-subject embarrassed but more I-can't-go-on-existing-after-what-has-happened embarrassed. It's that moment when you're swimming and you think there's seaweed caught round your ankles and you flick it free. Then you realise that what you thought was seaweed was actually your swimming trunks and now you've kicked them away you can't find them. There is a very crowded beach between you and your towel.

Or it's the time you're sitting on the bus going on about how stupid and ugly and pointless your mate is, only to turn round and find that mate's mother sitting behind you.

That is total mega embarrassment!

Children can focus on one particular embarrassing moment and describe it or perhaps list a series of such moments in a poem:

*If my whole life flashed before me
I wouldn't want to remember
The day my dad took his trousers off in public
because a wasp had got inside them
The moment I took hold of someone's hand in the supermarket
and it wasn't Mum's
The journey when we found ourselves driving along
an airport runway
The meal when I spilt gravy all over dad's important business guest
And worst of all
Being made to hold my teacher's hand because I'd misbehaved on the way to
swimming lesson*

• Feeling frightened

Encouraging the children to remember a time when they were frightened can often kick-start a poem or story. Children can list things that they would like to do but are too frightened to attempt. Brian's list would include riding on a roller coaster and taking a trip on a boat for anything longer than the Isle of Wight crossing. Roger's would certainly feature finding himself at the top of the Empire State Building or climbing a mountain. Thinking about their fears and the way they react to them may help your writers understand themselves a little more and act as a stimulus for a piece of work.

Tornado Chasing

by Lucy

I'd like to feel the racing wind,
I'd like to see the lightning.
I'd like to test the tornado's patience
and cure my phobia of storms.

I'd like to do this
but guess what,
I won't!

I'm Far Too Scared!

by Josie

There are many things I'd love to do –
but the problem is I'm far too scared.

I'd love to swim alongside sharks, the assassins of the sea,
but I can't, I'm far too scared.

I'd love to jump off the high board and feel the air
whip past me as I plunge to the water below,
but I can't, I'm far too scared.

I'd love to sing and dance on a stage with fancy costumes
and shakers, in front of a clapping crowd,
but I can't, I'm far too scared.

I'd love to stand up to bullies rather than receiving
a round red nose and a black eye,
but I can't, I'm far too scared.

I'd love to do what I feel when I feel
rather than bottling up all my emotions,
but I can't, I'm far too scared.

There are many things I'd love to do –
but I can't
I'm – far – too – scared.

I Want to Ride Nemesis Inferno

by Monique

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
It's here at Thorpe Park.
I don't care about the sissy rides,
the teacups and all of that lark.

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
feel the wind rush through my hair.
I get up close and then I stop
and stare and stare and stare.

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
ride it right to the top
and then rush down that steep, steep hill
dropping, dropping, drop.

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
feel the lonely breeze,
but then at the start time
I absolutely freeze.

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
It would be really fun.
I'm just about to get on
but then I see my mum.

I want to ride Nemesis Inferno,
but now I'm going home.
I'm going to ride Nemesis Inferno,
Well, next time anyway!

- *Crossing the river*

Tell the class that they are standing on the bank of a river. The river is as wide as the classroom. Ask them to suggest ways to get to the other side. As they make suggestions – write them on the board.

This is a brainstorming session and you are encouraging the children to be as wild and imaginative as possible. If their idea will get them across the divide – that's fine.

You should end up with thirty or forty suggestions! These might range from – *cross over by bridge, swim, go by boat* – to these suggestions from a group of Year 7 writers in Battle, East Sussex.

- *Join a circus and borrow the clown's stilts.*
- *Blow up a puffer fish with helium and float across.*
- *Cross using a pair of ancient Greek winged sandals.*
- *Cross the river by standing on the tongue of a whale.*
- *Wait for a very cold day, then – when the river freezes – skate across.*
- *Catch a lift with the Flying Monkeys.*

That was a great group to work with!

Discuss with your group or class the order of lines in a poem like this. They might like to put the obvious things first and the most crazy suggestion last. You might also discuss rhythm and rhyme. Would your poem lend itself to either?

Brainstorm ideas for a poem such as:

- *Ten ways to get out of doing homework, (a popular suggestion)*
- *Seventeen ways to climb over a wall.*
- *Eleven ways to help Mum.*
- *Things to do when you're really bored.*

Here are some ideas which children have produced:

Ways to Train a Pigeon

by Jessie

Give it some food and then throw it up in the air.
Tie it to a piece of string and pull the string up and down.
Throw it out of a plane and hope it survives.
Talk to it calmly then throw it out of a plane with a parachute.
Get some tiny pigeon rocket boots and attach them on.
Stuff it in a bottle of pop, shake it up, and hope it lands in Australia.

Fifteen Ways to Make a Cat Love You

by Ewen

begins with...

Feed it fifteen times a day, when it needs you – attend it and stroke it...

and finishes with...

...buy it a personal pillow with its name sewn on, when it dies use a gravestone and plant a tree in its memory.

This list poem format has a lot of potential for children's poetry. Another version might be to write down ten things that they would find in a particular container – a mermaid's purse, a footballer's shoulder bag, a mad scientist's briefcase or the prime minister's glove compartment. Remind them that they should feel happy to take risks with their writing and to think of items that are witty and surprising.

Ten Things Found in Beckham's Shoulder Bag

(written when Becks was still at Man U!)

by Nico

1. Socks.
2. £1,000,000 in cash.
3. Christmas card from Santa.
4. Spare net in case he breaks the first.
5. Scissors for different hair cuts, although he doesn't need them at the moment.
6. TV camera, if he's not on TV he can film himself!
7. All his team-mates' names in case he forgets.
8. Alec's phone number.
9. Lucky ball for free kicks.
10. Goalkeeper's gloves in case he's needed.

Stella listed the items that might be found in a model's handbag. By playing around with her ideas she was able to turn them into a poem using rhyming couplets:

A Model's Handbag

by Stella

In a model's handbag you might find
The reddest lipstick (the very best kind).
The smelliest perfume that would make you faint,
Eyeshadow that sticks to you like paint.

Blush that makes you look like you've run a race,
A mirror to compliment your face.
An expensive pot of fine face cream
(ooey, gooey and very green).

Mascara to give you fine black lashes,
Powder that gives you awful rashes.
Some Australian cigarettes (very rare)
And spray for last-minute spraying of hair.