



# Writing

Being able to comprehensibly and accurately write is a measure of fluency in a language. Although few students actually enjoy writing, they can, if the teacher presents the lesson well, approach the activity in a very positive frame of mind.

## WHY TEACH WRITING?

1. Exposure to a foreign language through more than one medium is likely to be more effective than relying on a single medium alone.

2. To reinforce language learned orally.
3. To aid retention and recall.
4. To show students that they are making progress.
5. For testing or external exam purposes.
6. For variety.
7. To encourage shy students to share their views.
8. For greater learning autonomy.
9. Students are more easily able to self-edit errors when writing than when speaking.

## WRITING AS PART OF A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO LANGUAGE

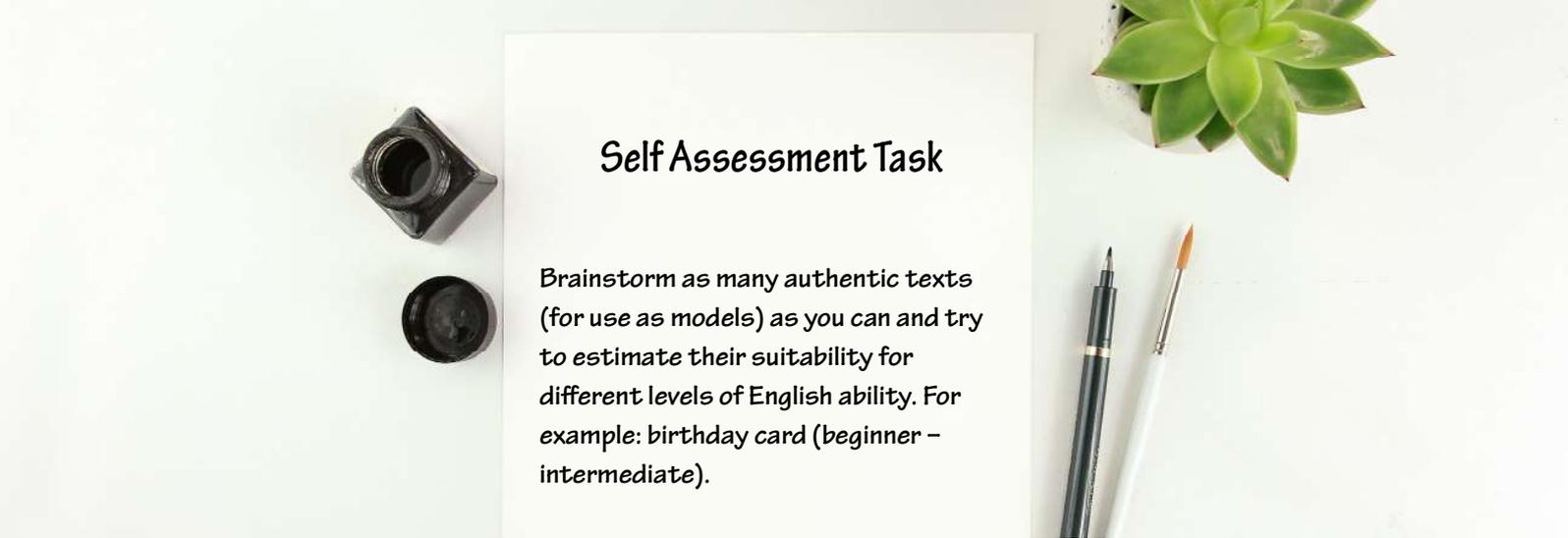
Many students find the task of writing in a foreign language particularly intimidating. A good teacher will bear this in mind when planning writing activities.

There are two basic ways to counter student hesitancy about writing tasks and these should be used in every writing activity.

1. **USE VISUALS.** Authentic texts/images, pictures, cartoons, graphs, diagrams, adverts etc. are very useful bases for writing activities. They provide valuable contextual information for students.

2. **USE MODELS.** A model will demonstrate standard or customary that are used in a particular type of text. Different cultures have traditional conventions for writing and we cannot assume that our students share ours. Models will show the student the degree of formality that is required, the way the text needs to be organized, the length that is expected and the type of vocabulary and grammar to be used.

- **AUTHENTIC MODELS.** An authentic model is a piece of writing that is used for real-life communication. It could, for example, be a movie review, a recipe, a news article, a business letter, or a letter to a newspaper.
- **PEDAGOGICAL MODELS.** These are examples that are specifically written for educational purposes. They take into account the level and interests of the students as well as the topic being studied. Typically one would find these in the student coursebook, or else teachers can make up models that suit their students.



## Self Assessment Task

Brainstorm as many authentic texts (for use as models) as you can and try to estimate their suitability for different levels of English ability. For example: birthday card (beginner – intermediate).

## BEGINNERS AND ADVANCED LEARNERS

The approach to lower and upper level learners varies. While pedagogical texts are more appropriate for beginners, authentic articles provide examples of real language for advanced learners.

The degree of control over the writing activity will also vary depending on the proficiency of the learner. For lower level learners, the teacher will need to control the task to a greater degree; while for upper level learners more creative expression and freedom are required.

Depending on the level of the student, the type of writing activity will vary. For lower levels, postcards, e-mails, recipes, simple poetry and diary entries are appropriate while intermediate speakers can manage book and movie reviews, scripts for role-plays and collaborative stories. Advanced learners may prefer creative writing such as articles for a magazine, a script for a play or even a short story.

## PRELIMINARIES TO WRITING

Before the students start writing there are several steps the teacher needs to take them through.

1. The teacher should begin by *engaging the students'* interest with prompts such as visual images or music.
2. These prompts should be the focus of an *exchange of opinions or ideas* by pairs or groups of students.
3. The teacher should *present the students with a model*, or an example of what it is they are going to write. Pairs or groups of students should be given tasks that require them to *analyse*:
  - a. **The form of the model.** This includes the types of heading, the number and nature of the paragraphs, and the layout of the text. Some cultures have no paragraphs and students may need to know how and why English texts are structured in this way. By analysing the model, they get a concrete demonstration of this.
  - b. **The content of the model.** The teacher should draw the students' attention towards the kind of information that is included and the order in which it appears. In western culture we tend to move from main point to supporting details, but not all cultures follow a linear progression of ideas and such students need to be shown how this works.
  - c. **Discourse markers.** These are words and phrases that English speakers conventionally use to clarify the line of argument to the reader/listener. They include words such as *initially, additionally, in conclusion, on the other hand* etc.

4. The teacher should tell the students the *purpose* of writing. The students will be more motivated if they are given a reason for writing other than demonstrating to the teacher the state of their writing skills.

5. The students also need to know *who their reader is*; otherwise they will just assume that it is the teacher in search of error free grammar and correct spelling.

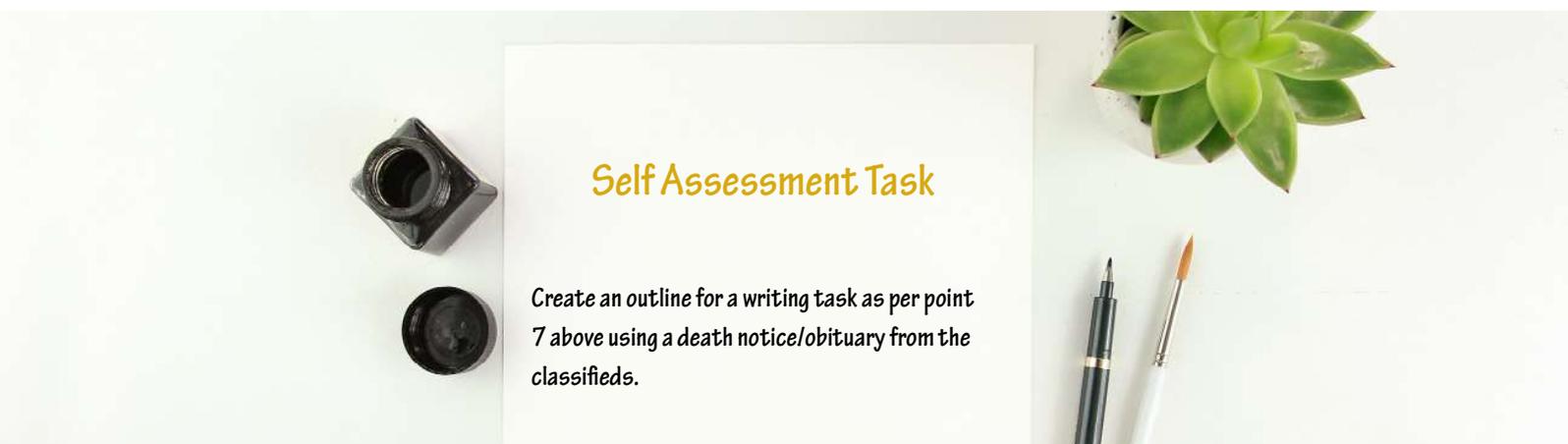
6. Students should be given the opportunity to both *brainstorm* ideas and to verbalise them with a partner before they begin to write.

7. The teacher should *outline the task* either by means of a handout or by writing the instructions on the board. The students need to know exactly what is required in terms of what is being written, why it is being written, who is going to read it, how the text is going to be organized, the tone of the language, the grammar likely to be used (if applicable) and examples of the type of vocabulary that will be used.

An example of such an outline is given below. The task is for students to create an estate agent's ad. The model is an actual ad taken from the property section of a local newspaper.

<b>TASK:</b>	Create an Estate Agent's Ad for a house you are trying to sell. Try and make the house sound fantastic. A bargain not to be missed.
<b>FOR:</b>	The classified section of the daily newspaper.
<b>READER:</b>	Prospective buyers.
<b>CONTENT:</b>	Location, price, description of house, estate agent's details.
<b>TONE:</b>	Gushy and persuasive. Use understatement and exaggeration.
<b>VOCABULARY:</b>	Grandiose and pretentious.
<b>GRAMMAR:</b>	Superlative adjectives.
<b>ORGANISATION:</b>	Follow the organization of the model, but substitute the copy that best suits the house you are trying to sell.

8. Upper level learners should be required to make a plan of their writing.



# THE WRITING ACTIVITY

1. Depending on the level of the students, they should **prepare a draft** before writing the final copy. Students should be encouraged to edit their own drafts before the teacher checks it.
2. If the students are writing in class, a **definite time limit** should be set.
3. If the students are writing at home, they need to be reminded of the necessity of **doing the work themselves** and not having a relative assist them.
4. The **model should be removed** from the students before they start writing; otherwise many of them will hand in near identical copies of the original.

## GROUP WRITING

Although writing is usually an individual activity, occasionally it is desirable to add variety to the writing lesson by having pairs or groups write something together. Scripts for role-plays, collaborative stories, ads for the classified column, brochures and "Dear Abby" letters are all suitable as they require considerable brain-storming and negotiation of ideas.

## ASSESSING WRITING

### PEER ASSESSMENT

Currently there is a school of thought that favours peer correction. The belief is that students will be interested in reading their fellow student's writing, and can learn from the activity of editing.

However, not all students respond well to peer correction and many feel that assessment should be the province of the native speaking teacher. There can also be some doubt as to the appropriate proficiency of the student marker.

### TEACHER ASSESSMENT

This is quite a time consuming task, which is why many teachers favour peer assessment. While the temptation is to cast one's eye cursorily over the text looking for and underlining errors, teachers should always purpose of the writing, and that should be their priority in deciding what comments they will make to the student. The following principles should be borne in mind.

- In a first reading, teachers should ignore all errors and focus on the content of the writing. The teacher's first written comment should be a response to the subject matter rather than errors. The teacher should make a specific comment rather than the general "*imaginative*" "*creative*" or "*good work Johnny.*" Students eventually realise that these are just clichés the busy teacher trots out without much thought.
- In the second reading teachers should focus not on individual errors, but rather on patterns of errors, or errors that impede meaning. They need to select one or two of these to comment on and let the others go. It can be seriously demoralizing for a student to have work returned full of red lines and crosses.
- The comments that teachers make should be specific enough for the student to know exactly what action he/she needs to take to improve the writing. Vague comments like "watch your past tenses" or "sloppy spelling" are quite unhelpful and leave the student feeling frustrated at not knowing exactly what action the teacher expects next.

- In order to involve the student in error correction, the teacher should indicate what sort of error it is and allow the student the opportunity to establish the correct form for him/herself. This is often done by means of a correction key (which, obviously, should be known by the student!).

#### Example of a correction key

T	=	Tense
P	=	Punctuation
WO	=	Word Order
Prep	=	Preposition
WW	=	Wrong Word
GR	=	Grammar
Y upside down	=	Word missing
SP	=	Spelling

- The teacher should always finish on a positive note. A general rule of thumb is to insert a negative comment between two positive ideas to let students know what they can do to improve their writing skills, not to let them know how useless they are at writing. When confronted with some really poor writing, it is very tempting to slip into a censorious tone that communicates the latter.

### Self Assessment Task

The news report below was written by an ESL student studying in Cape Town.

1. Establish what problems the student had with comprehension? Could any of these have been dealt with before the student started writing?
2. Look at the organisation of the story. What is good about it and what is poor? With regard to the latter, how could this have been prevented?
3. Read through the article and write beneath it three comments that will be useful to the student.
4. Using the example of the error correction key above, note the errors in the story.



#### Brave Kid Nails Father's Killer

The gangster came later at midnight and make a lot of noise then the son wake up but the father was still sleeping. After some time the killer open the father's room but the kid followed him.

The kid is in nature stubborn. When the gangster wanted to open the drawer the kid jumped and screech the killer face with his nail.

The father wake up suddenly because of his noise and then took his arm.

The kid did really killed the gangster but helped his father.



# CERTIFICATE ASSESSMENT TASK - 3

## WRITING

Using the communicative approach to writing activities, design and describe in detail (including every step in the process) a writing activity based on an authentic model for an intermediate class. Describe all the preliminaries and the actual activity. Try to anticipate any difficulties the class might have.

This should be no longer than 1500 words. Provide a copy of the text of the authentic model.