Writing like a writer

The mind is a narrative device – we run on stories.
Libby Gleeson

In this new edition of Libby Gleeson’s Writing like a writer we see how teachers can support their students in their ‘narrative imagining’ and we learn this from Libby, herself a writer, who fully appreciates how story is ‘the fundamental instrument of thought’. Libby shares her knowledge of writing literary texts and suggests a range of teaching/learning experiences that teachers may employ with their students.

This book provides teachers with clear descriptions and activities to help students create their own characters, dialogue, place, action and everything in between, so that they too can express their knowledge of humans and of feelings in their narratives.

‘When you learn how to write like a writer you have the most powerful of tools in your hands’.

This statement by Libby Gleeson about the essence of writing narratives remains the same even while there have been many changes in how students compose texts, including those of a digital and multimodal type and via the use of the internet and digital devices and as recognised by the Australian Curriculum: English.

In the new edition of Writing Like a writer the relevant Outcomes and Content Descriptions across year levels from the Australian Curriculum: English are referenced throughout the work. Readers of the book can use these to access the references listed on the PETAA website. In the online environment, for the ePd version of the book, the codes have been hyperlinked to make the details more easily available to teachers.

About the author
Libby Gleeson is the author of many picture books, short stories and novels for young people of all ages. Her work is widely published overseas and she has been shortlisted or has won almost every literary prize in the country. Her picture book: The Great Bear, illustrated by Armin Greder is the only Australian title to have won the international award: the Bologna Ragazzi. In 2013 her novel RED won the Australian Prime Minister’s award.

Libby is a trained secondary teacher and regularly visits primary and secondary schools to run writing workshops for students and professional development for teachers. She has lectured in numerous tertiary institutions in both children’s literature and creative writing and her course ‘Writing for Children’ at the University of Sydney has produced many published writers.

In 2007, Libby was awarded an AM, an Order of Australia, for her work in Australian Literature and Literacy Education.

The Primary English Teaching Association Australia (PETAA), founded in 1972, is a national professional association supporting primary school educators in the teaching and learning of English and literacies across the curriculum. For more information about PETAA, membership and to view professional learning resources, visit the website.

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... we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

Barbara Hardy, The Cool Web, p. 13
Foreword

My story

I am a writer of fiction, a crafter of narrative. I write picture books, novels and short stories for young people. I also write about writing and I teach creative writing at secondary and tertiary level. When I write, I believe there are two different processes going on.

The first is creative or imaginative thinking. I need to imagine the story: the structure, the action of the plot and the characters in all their detail. I do that from my experience of life and from my own encounters with story over many years. These might be stories I’ve heard someone tell, stories I have read or stories I have seen as film, as television or as drama on stage.

At the same time, all the writing skills that I have been taught or that I have learnt, including everything I know about language and grammar from more than thirty years’ professional experience, must come into play or the richest imagining in the world will come to nothing.

How did I learn to do this? What do I remember of the teaching of writing when I was in primary school?

I cannot remember any lessons that focused on the mechanics of writing a story. We had a composition book and I think that in every class we wrote at least one composition a week. I have a vague memory of writing descriptions and I know we had lots of lessons in building up sentences to learn how to use new vocabulary, and breaking down sentences to understand their grammar. I wrote reams of purple prose. I was an adjective and adverb junkie. My work was regularly covered in the red ink that indicated spelling mistakes. No-one ever evaluated the work in terms of its structure, the way it built the characters, the development of dramatic tension, the use of dialogue or the experiments with point of view.
When I became a secondary English teacher in the 1970s, I was no different as a teacher of writing than those who had taught me in primary school. I suspect the topics for writing that I chose were closely connected to the literature being studied, but I knew nothing of analysing, and therefore of creating a narrative text.

I had long nursed a desire to write fiction: to be a writer. In the late 1970s while I was living and working in Europe, I began my first novel. I filled an exercise book with the same flowery style as my youthful compositions. Then in 1978 I fell into a writers' workshop in London. I had never heard of a writers' workshop and had no idea what to expect.

Over the next two years I served an apprenticeship. Every Friday night the group met to do short writing exercises and to critique each other's work. We took turns to read and talk about our work in progress. The group pulled to pieces my passages of purple prose and helped me find a whole new voice. I learnt about the need for detail and imagery in descriptive writing; for narrative drive to come from conflict between characters or from the conflict within characters themselves. I learnt to play and experiment with language, with time shifts, with structure and with point of view.

In short, that group taught me how to be a writer.

In the years since then I have used many of the London group's ideas with my own students in schools and universities. This book is my translation of all that, and more, for the primary school teacher.

How to use this book

This is not a writing course. It's a resource book for you, the teacher. In it you will find ideas and examples of aspects of the writing process that you can focus on with your students.

Writing a sustained narrative may be the aim, but to do so requires a considerable amount of time. Identifying the components of a narrative can lead to an understanding of the ways a writer creates a story. Formal teaching and writing practice can build skills that will make the complex task of narrative writing easier.

There are many ways that writers approach their task. This book sets out some of those ways. You discover other approaches by reading widely. Children's literature is a treasure house of narrative waiting to be discovered. My advice to anyone who wants to improve their writing: read, read, read and write, write, write. In the context of teaching young students I vary that to read, talk, draw and write. And then I add, be ready and willing to share your work. Offer it to others to read and to provide critical comment.

Libby Gleeson
In his book, *The storytelling animal*, evolutionary psychologist, Jonathan Gottschall, details and celebrates our compulsion to tell stories, to read, view, listen to, enact and dream narrative. There are theories as to the purpose of story: the evolutionary selection of displaying our skill and intelligence, a form of cognitive play to exercise our mental muscles, instruction in all kinds of experiences without our needing them first-hand, a social glue of instruction in shared values. Whatever the theory, we make up stories all the time. We use narrative to define who we are as individuals, as members of a social group and as citizens.

Many of us educated before the 1970s knew 'composition' or story writing as the only form of sustained writing in the primary classroom. Some other types of texts were not taught until secondary school, if they were taught at all. In the 1970s there was a dramatic shift in the way writing was both understood and taught. The result is now an emphasis on writing across a range of text types. Students are taught a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts.

Writing a narrative is different to writing any other type of text. It also has the capacity to be more complex. A class writing a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts will produce many examples that are almost identical. Students writing a narrative, even if the teacher provides boundaries of the plot line and the characters, or the class has developed these as a group exercise, will produce many different stories.
Writing a narrative is an act of creativity. Who are the characters in my story? How many are there? What do they look like? Where are they? What are they doing? Who is telling this story? What kind of voice will I use to tell the story? Will I use dialogue? How will I start? What will I write next? What if ...?

Whatever the teaching, the writers are on their own, drawing on their experience of life, of language and of story to make meaning. Writing their story is an act of self-expression and self-validation. Individual success brings self-confidence. But it does more than that. Many writers see making narratives as being about making meaning, about ordering reality and helping us make sense of our human world.

In fact, the psychologist Nicolopoulou (1997, p. 157) maintains that:

- Narrative is a cognitively crucial activity because it is a mode not only of representing but of constituting reality and conferring meaning on experience ...
- Children use these narrative activities not just to represent the world but to make sense of it – both factually and emotionally – and to find their place in it.

Empathy comes from immersing yourself in stories that are about others. Creating a story about an ‘other’ forces you to see the world through the eyes of that ‘other’.

I experienced this most when writing *Mahtab’s story* (Gleeson, 2008), a novel for young people. The book is based on the real events one family suffered when escaping from the Taliban in Afghanistan. The research meant many hours talking with the parents and the children, about their perilous journey as well as the months of incarceration in an Australian detention centre.

Some years ago, Paul Jennings said at a conference, ‘I don’t bash people up because I read books.’ I would add that I feel the same way because I write stories.
Further information

Students learn how to use personal knowledge and literary texts as starting points to create imaginative writing in different forms and genres and for particular audiences. Using print, digital and online media, students develop skills that allow them to convey meaning, address significant issues and heighten engagement and impact.

*Australian Curriculum: English, Content structure, Literature Strand*

In *Writing like a writer: New Edition*, the *Australian Curriculum: English* and the *NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum: English K-10* is referenced throughout the work, with relevant Outcomes and Content Descriptions across year levels. To assist teachers to link the content of this book with the requirements in the syllabuses explicit links to the Language, Literature and Literacy strands, Content Descriptions and Elaborations across the Year levels F–8 are made throughout this book.

Look for [0.0] that sits besides the text and is relevant to the specific focus (though not all options are included and to avoid repetition) and links to appropriate Content Descriptions. Visit the PETAA website [www.petaa.edu.au/wlaw] where you will find the reference for these codes hyperlinked to the relevant sections of the two syllabuses. If you are using an ePub version of this book, you can click on the icons and you will be taken directly to the syllabus references.

Other references

While references have been updated throughout this work, additional lists of useful references have been provided: Further reading and Useful websites. You will find these on pages 98 and 99.
Creativity involves curiosity, playing with ideas, challenging accepted views, imagining alternatives and experimenting. It is suppressed by anxiety, conformity, narrow questioning, simplistic demands, rigid control and time restriction.

Politicians, educators and the community in general all agree that to be a strong and successful country in the twenty-first century, we need to be innovative, imaginative and creative. This cannot be grafted on in adulthood but must be fundamental to the way we are taught from the beginning. How do we do this in the primary classroom?

Children come to school having learnt what they know largely through creative play. Children’s play is not just ‘mucking around’. It is through their play that young children explore their world: learning about social relationships, rule-governed behaviour and the experience of trying on the persona of the other. Remember the childhood games: ‘I must be the mother and you must be the baby …’. Children create scenes and act out dramas, all the while making sense of their world and themselves in it.
Too often, when they come to school, play becomes relegated to the periods of recess and lunchtime. Even there it is sometimes lost as extra school activities and organised sport take over. Much of the creativity that has sustained their learning is suppressed for so-called ‘formal’ learning to take place. Seated at a desk, their bodies are restricted and contained. Their minds may suffer the same fate. Too often, their previously wide-ranging questions give way to simply trying to guess what the teacher is thinking or demonstrating what they already know.

It is particularly regrettable that there is a movement to begin formal learning earlier and earlier. The ‘hot housing’ of preschool students is becoming more and more frequent.

In the creative classroom, children's ideas are sought and respected. Open-ended questioning, where the answer is not known, is used to discover rather than to elicit the right answer. Discussion and problem-solving are key features of this kind of teaching and learning. Talk, teacher-to-student and student-to-student, is not just encouraged – it is mandatory, and the conversation is not always determined or validated by the teacher although much of the talk follows explicit teaching.

Overwhelmingly, students are challenged to solve problems across all subject content areas. There is stimulation to think beyond the simple absorption of information rather than factual recall or regurgitation. Task-based learning, constant group activities and the exploitation of the ‘teachable moment’ are ever present. There is not only time to carry out the activity, but time to reflect and learn from that activity as well.

The creative or expressive arts are important. Students' senses are stimulated through immersion in and reflection on fine examples of music, the visual arts, story, dance and drama. They are able to experiment with problem-solving, with making and doing, drawing, painting, sculpting and role-playing. They make music in many different forms with different, often homemade, instruments. They design and build things, act out dramas and write.

The atmosphere in the classroom is relaxed and supportive. Individual differences and original ideas and work are celebrated, and there is time to develop ideas and produce the fruits of those ideas. Children feel comfortable to take risks and explore the unusual. The following is an account of one such creative classroom.

**Jenny Walke** was the Year 1 teacher at Gladesville Public School whose work with her class was observed for the first edition of this book. Gladesville is an inner suburb in the north west of Sydney and the school is medium sized with spacious grounds. After nearly 30 years of teaching, Jenny described her approach as child-centred. She tried to see situations through the child's eyes and to always work with the children rather than against them. Humour and affection were part of her repertoire.
The class was divided into four groups that moved through activities during the day, sometimes in the group and sometimes combining as the whole class. By working in groups the children were able to make maximum use of the classroom resources. It also enabled Jenny to focus on a group/child who needed support or extension in a particular area.

The classroom was filled with art: prints from the masters, such as Van Gogh, and posters from exhibitions dominated the walls, while the children’s work hung above their work tables. The children’s artistic skills were continually being developed through learning techniques of drawing, including various methods of working with watercolours and acrylic paints and collage-making. And all the while children talked to each other about features of their works of art – the various lines, shapes, colours and textures that they had used or perhaps the personality traits of a particular literary character they had just painted. Jenny’s students did not work on activities that would produce twenty-five copies of the same artwork. Instead, each child was encouraged to work on his or her own ideas and interpretation of the task.

There were boxes of picture books within easy reach as well as shelves of trays with Lego and other construction materials. If they finished a task early, children took a picture book from the box and read.

There was one box that contained dramatic images cut from photographic magazines, mounted and covered with protective plastic. Every day, as soon as the class began and the children were gathered around her, Jenny took an image from the box and wrote a response on her whiteboard. In this way children saw an experienced writer at work. Firstly they saw her juggling various scenarios before she finally came up with a story that she was happy with. And to support this story she began to conjure up ideas from her imagination – then and there – to produce a piece of writing that was sometimes serious, sometimes witty and wacky but always thought-provoking. Then each child selected a picture. Some simply described what was in the image that they had chosen for that day. Others were encouraged to use the image as a trigger to write of their feelings, a memory that was stirred or to simply ask questions of the image. This was free writing; writing without scaffolds and writing that genuinely came from the child.

I wonder who is singing at the opera house? Could it be Michael Buble? or Jeff Buckley? I wonder which one of them if it’s Michael Buble he might sing ‘Call Me Irresponsible’ if it Jeff Buckley he might sing ‘Grace’ or they might sing together that would be incredible! man they might even take turns. Jeff Buckley might sing in the day and Michael Buble might sing in the night? or it could be the other way hmmmmmm confusing.

Amy, Year 1
Problem-solving was a large part of Jenny’s teaching. In a corner stood a stuffed giraffe, a bandage around its neck. The problem to be solved that day was how the vet would reach the spot which had to be treated. The class discussed the issue and was designing and constructing a platform from material in the ‘junk’ box.

Jenny was highly organised and questioned herself constantly about her practice and her students’ achievements.

1 The spelling in students’ work samples has been standardised as these works are first drafts.

Gently slipping through the jungle bushes, the Thinger is hunting some ants. The Thinger is an insect itself but the size of a human head. But the Thinger has one thing no other insect has eyelids. A Thinger’s eyelids can grow as thick as a human head with eyes the size of a grain of sand. Incredible!

Harry, Year 1
Activities for a creative classroom

- Pose inventive problems such as:
  - You find yourself sitting on an elephant. How will you get down?
  - You’ve lost some money down a narrow drain. How will you get it out?
  - How would your life be different if you had two extra eyes at the back of your head?
  - If you could have an extra arm or leg, which would you choose? Why?

If I had another arm I would be known all over the country. People would call me three arms and triple limbs. I could join the circus. Juggling would be easier and Karate would be fun. I could be a singer while doing surgery and I could use much more nail polish. I would have special tops with 3 sleeves.

Bridget, Year 4

- Provide exposure to examples of all kinds of creative work: literature, visual art, sculpture or music.
- Choose examples of highly regarded work but also work that may arouse curiosity, such as the images of MC Escher or Heath Robinson. Choose artworks that come from cultures other than in the Western world and invite students to respond and question each other about their responses. What do they think the artists may have been thinking when they were creating those works? Why do they think that?
- Using the same approach as the activity above, allow students to react to literature. Expose children to all kinds of story and poetry and invite responses. (See Chapter two: Getting started.)
- Invite students to invent a new game. Impose some boundaries: a sporting game for individuals or the whole class; a board game that incorporates geographical knowledge or any other aspect of the curriculum.
- Work with students to invent a language.
- Invite students to redesign their classroom, their school, their home or their city. This can be done in numerous contexts: climate, social structure, wealth, population or whatever other boundaries you wish the class to explore.
• Invite students to create a new national day of celebration. Ask them to justify their choice and plan appropriate community activities.

• Invite solutions to real-life problems such as reducing waste in the running of the school or reducing water consumption. Projects such as these become significant exercises in using the imagination: work in a group to analyse the problem, design and articulate solutions, make models and display the work to the larger community.

• Invite older children to create ways of teaching younger children some aspect of the curriculum.
For further ideas in this area

The bibliographic details of the books mentioned here and others are provided in the Further reading section on page 98.

Adventures in thinking by Joan Dalton
Everything I know about writing, by John Marsden,
(particularly Part 3)
Beyond the script: Take two. Drama in the classroom,
by Robyn Ann Ewing, Jennifer Simons, Margery Hertzberg

The web has an enormous number of sites that can be used this way. Seek out pages by entering ‘critical thinking for kids,’ or ‘brain games for kids’. Please refer to the list of Useful websites on page 99 for more information.