

Scaffolding writing

Step 1: Setting context and building the field (developing knowledge of the topic)

Students' ability to use their existing linguistic and cultural resources can be maximised by ensuring that they have meaningful ideas to write about. Therefore, the writing process should start with a focus on content: how to build up the information about the topic the students will write about. Knowledge of the topic is essential for both factual and narrative texts. Writers need to gather new information and structure their prior knowledge and experiences. At this step, it may be relevant to encourage students with L1 literacy backgrounds to draw upon this resource to help them locate, evaluate and analyse information. Key vocabulary related to the topic needs to be collected and activated.

Possible activities at step 1:

- Semantic mapping, wallpapering, brainstorming.
- Pre-reading activities (e.g. jigsaw reading in groups).
- Develop a word wall from topic-related vocabulary.
- Interview an expert or make an excursion to a relevant place.
- Graphic outlining (timeline, information grid, etc.).
- Employ technology that students already use for information retrieval.

Step 2: Modeling and deconstructing the genre

This step aims to build students' knowledge of the focus genre. Students should become familiar with the social purpose, organisation and language features of the genre. With the help of good model texts, the key features can be highlighted: How is the text structured? How is it sequenced (e.g. logically or in time?) What tense is typically used? What is typical of the vocabulary used? What are the special characteristics of the language used (e.g. typical linguistic constructions)?

Possible activities at step 2:

- Display and read a model text to the students and discuss the purpose of the genre. Draw attention to the organisation and language features of the genre.
- Give students different examples of the focus genre and ask them to compare them and infer how they are alike.
- Have students reconstruct a coherent text from jumbled sentences.
- Choose a model text and delete from it the words that typify the focus genre (e.g. connectives and word forms typical to the genre). Ask students to complete the text with suitable words and forms. Discuss their suggestions and compare their appropriateness in the context.



Step 3. Practising through collaborative writing

At this step the teacher and students write a piece of text on the chosen genre together. In this teacher-guided collaborative task, it is important to discuss the relevance of content, structure and language during the process of writing. The teacher's role is to help students to reshape the wording to follow the conventions related to the genre in question. This step is important in terms of demonstrating both the process and the product of writing. Students see that writing is a continuous process of rereading, revising and rewriting the text. The final text is not developed the first time.

Step 4. Practising independent writing

As students have developed knowledge of the topic and genre and experienced the process of writing a text representing the chosen genre, they should now be able to write a text independently. The teacher's role during this step is to encourage students to make use of the models used in earlier phases, show their initial drafts to each other, to give and receive feedback and to support individual students as necessary.

Some students might need more scaffolding. The teacher can provide them with a framework that includes a ready-made structure for building the text, often the first few words of each paragraph or sentence frames, e.g.

'One similarity between _____ and _____ is that ...', 'A key distinction between _____ and _____ is that ...'.

Below are two examples of a framework, one for an experiment report and another for argumentative text. They model how student should organise his/her writing, as well as ways to link sentences or paragraphs. By using a writing frame student begins to gain familiarity with form and language relevant to a particular curriculum context, so that s/he can gradually use language appropriately to write independently.



Experiment report

Title:
<i>What was your experiment about?</i>
Our task was to explore...
In our experiment we...
First...
In addition...
Finally...
<i>What did you find out in your experiment?</i>
We discovered that...
On the basis of our observations we concluded that...
In addition...
<i>What made your experiment successful and how can your results be used?</i>
Our experiment was / was not successful, because...
Our results / observations are useful because... / Our results can be used for...



Argumentative text

Title:
What is the discussion about? What is your opinion?
It is often said that...
Many people argue that...
However, in my opinion...
What are the arguments behind your opinion?
There are a number of reasons why this is the case.
First...
In addition...
Moreover...
Finally...
Why do other people disagree with your opinion? What are their counterarguments?
On the other hand, some people argue that...
In addition...
It has also been suggested that...
Repeat your view and summarise your arguments.
However, overall it can be argued that...
...because...