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What is needed from education policy to boost writing outcomes?

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Acknowledgements

This paper is a summary of the discussion of the roundtable (conducted under Chatham House Rule), which revealed how stakeholders are approaching writing policies in light of recent progress in reading outcomes, as well as the major barriers to improving writing and the potential solutions to those challenges. We are grateful to Oxford University Press for their support of the event and to all participants for their contributions.

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Introduction

Writing is judged by experts to be one of the most complex skills that children are asked to master. This complexity means that it is a more challenging area to research and thus to develop clear teaching approaches and methods in schools.

The challenges in this area are visible in primary attainment data; [DfE statistics](#) show that attainment in writing for 11-year-olds in 23/24 was, alongside grammar, punctuation and spelling, lower than any other subject, with significant attainment gaps for specific groups of pupils, in particular students with SEND, disadvantaged students, boys and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils. Moreover, [research](#) also suggests that children's enjoyment of writing is decreasing and many children don't have the resources they need to be able to write in their free time.

Despite this, unlike reading, maths, grammar, punctuation and spelling, there are no statutory national tests for writing. Global assessments, such as PISA and PIRLS, focus on reading rather than writing. Successive governments have thus tended to focus on and fund interventions and research aiming to improve reading outcomes.

We know that learning to write is critical; [recent research](#) shows that handwriting “contributes extensively to the brain's connectivity patterns that promote learning”, supports cognitive development, oracy and critical thinking skills. Yet, with advances in technology, there are concerns that generative artificial intelligence (GAI) will further impact the teaching of writing in schools and children will struggle to develop this crucial skill.

In January 2025, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and Oxford University Press (OUP) brought together trust leaders, publishers, researchers, civil servants and other education stakeholders to discuss the current challenges preventing improvements in writing and how these can be overcome. The discussion touched on research gaps and a lack of political will; opportunities to reform the curriculum and improve teaching practice, including through greater access to continuous professional development (CPD), and finally, what impact the rise of technology is having and how schools can harness its power to support their writing pedagogy and practice.

What are the challenges to improving writing outcomes and what solutions exist to solve them?

A lack of shared definition:

A key initial hurdle raised was a lack of shared understanding on what the term ‘writing’ refers to in practice. While participants agreed that there is a mutual understanding of what ‘reading’ means in the sector, citing processes like ‘decoding’, it was clear that this shared understanding does not extend to writing. Participants agreed that while some interpret ‘writing’ as distinct from ‘writing for pleasure’, it is not agreed whether the term refers to functional literacy and concrete skills like handwriting or sentence structure, or more abstract endeavours like description and imaginative work.

Participants recognised that the language teachers and parents use is important: children often think writing is learning to handwrite, whereas adults rarely produce long-form handwritten work. Participants considered whether there needs to be a separation between the process of making marks on a page and the meaning conveyed and whether relabelling this process as communication skills, which could encompass a broader sense of what it means to write, would be a useful step, particularly given the growing presence of technology in all our lives. The Oracy Education Commission’s [2024 report](#) also highlights that speaking and listening skills are essential building blocks for reading and writing and that well-know approaches to teaching writing, such as ‘Talk for Writing’ rely on talk-based pedagogies. These findings could offer further weight to the suggestion of relabelling the process as ‘communication skills’.

Research gaps:

Due to the complexity of writing as a skill and the challenge of a lack of shared definition outlined above, it is a difficult area to research and thus to develop clear teaching approaches in schools. Participants highlighted the inadequate research base that exists for writing, especially in comparison to reading which receives stronger financial support in research settings. For example, the enjoyment and frequency of reading for children with FSM is reportedly higher than that of their more advantaged peers, but this trend is not reflected in writing. This was raised as an example of a knowledge gap which researchers want to investigate but have not received the funding to do so. Moreover, participants mentioned that there is evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic had many impacts on children including early language development and the manual dexterity needed to manipulate a pen which then have a knock-on effect on their writing, but again this needs further research. Participants identified the dual challenge of building an evidence base and sector-wide understanding of which approaches work for children, while disseminating it in a manner that is manageable and clear for teachers with heavy workloads and little time.

In response to the challenge of a lack of understanding of effective pedagogy, participants called for further research to uncover what makes a difference to teaching writing, in order to then scale it up

across the country. Participants noted that while the current evidence base is light, there is material available and pointed to the Education Endowment Foundation's [guidance reports](#) as an example.

A lack of political will and systemic infrastructure to drive improvements:

The paucity of research is both driven and compounded by a lack of political will. Reading outcomes are benchmarked by PISA and PIRLS but a similar international comparative is not available for writing. Without the incentive of external accountability, a greater, more deliberate focus from national government is needed to drive change in schools.

Participants expressed their interest in the Department for Education's (DfE) proposed Writing Framework. One participant with knowledge of the framework development said that it is still relatively early on in the current administration but Labour's manifesto is clear that the Government wants strong foundations in reading and writing. One of the Government's key education targets is for the proportion of children who are 'school ready' to rise to 75%. School readiness is measured through the early learning goals, which do cover literacy, including writing, alongside personal, social and emotional development, physical development, communication and language and mathematics. Similarly, a key aim of the Curriculum & Assessment Review is to develop "an excellent foundation in core subjects of reading, writing and maths." These two policy drivers should mean that writing will have a stronger policy focus in the future. Since the roundtable was held, the Secretary of state for Education Bridget Phillipson MP has [announced](#) that the Writing Framework will be published in summer 2025, "that will be a first step to support schools in delivering high quality writing provision across England ensuring all pupils have a strong foundation in writing."

In order to be effective, participants felt there needs to be clarity of communication from the government on why writing is important, in a similar way to the drive to improve reading. Alongside this, participants noted there were key national levers involved in the success of phonics, including specific funding, English hubs and a focus from the accountability system. One participant felt that Ofsted's focus on reading has driven improvements across the country but writing is not examined during an inspection so it is less of a priority for the school. A similar systemic infrastructure will be necessary to see comparable widespread improvements in writing.

Curriculum:

The lack of research outlined above makes it harder for teachers to improve their classroom practice and pedagogy. Participants highlighted that educators are repeatedly identifying writing as a key area of the curriculum in which they would like to see greater guidance.. One participant highlighted that the English curriculum for KS2 comprises a series of statements on what children should have experienced and which writing skills they should be able to navigate, but this does not constitute the detail that we see in KS1 reading. They called for a similar directive roadmap for writing in order to support pedagogy.

Moreover, participants also felt that some elements of the curriculum are not useful, pointing to the subjunctive as a distraction that takes time away from more important elements of writing. Related

to this, another participant made the point that assessments are potentially not fit for purpose. Their trust is looking at ‘stripping back’ assessment in KS1 to focus on skills which are key to development.

Teaching practice:

There were many ideas raised about the best way to teach writing and some debate over where the key areas of focus should be, speaking to the points above on the necessity for further research to gain clarity on best practice. These ideas are outlined below.

When discussing the practice of teaching writing, participants outlined the importance of considering how children develop their perceptions of what writing is for. Traditionally, longer-form writing is siloed within the English curriculum, and potentially other humanities subjects. One participant outlined the model in their trusts which takes a whole-school approach to writing, from nursery through to year 6, and embeds writing across the curriculum. This approach enables pupils who may find writing boring or challenging to find enjoyment because they are passionate about a subject they are writing on. Related to this, it was mentioned that there should be a diversity of themes and freedom for children to choose what they wish to write on to ensure they see themselves represented in their own work and in school life – of particular importance for disadvantaged children.

It was also felt that motivation is key: teachers must support pupils to understand why they are being asked to write and how it matters for their life. Participations mentioned that currently, pupils initially learn to think of writing as a functional, laborious way of recording knowledge, an interpretation which then continues into secondary school, decreasing engagement and enjoyment in writing. Rather, participants felt it is key for teachers to demonstrate writing as a form of self-expression and creativity and give pupils the will to want to do it, perhaps through writing instructions for a game or keeping a diary. One participant described writing as “medicine for the soul” which allows the expression of emotions in a private space, and underlined the importance of this not being assessed. Creating a low-stakes space for writing is key to ensure children can develop their enjoyment.

Another participant highlighted the value of functional literacy, suggesting that children should be writing about what they know and suggested that this focus on functional literacy is particularly beneficial for lower-attaining children and pupils with SEND.

It was also noted that the act of writing cannot be separated from the act of reading; in practice, this means there should be space in the curriculum for children to read entire texts, rather than merely extracts. One participant also noted that in the past twenty years, widespread recognition of the value of reading has moved beyond the school gates into the home environment. A similar shift in attitudes on the part of parents regarding writing was noted as important; it would be useful to develop materials to support parents to involve their children in writing at home.

Participants agreed on the usefulness of a small steps approach. For example, rather than setting out to write a letter which can feel overwhelming for a KS1 child, teaching should focus on the

building blocks of building sentences which can then be built on as the pupil progresses through school.

Taking the example of phonics, one participant highlighted that phonics are ‘a floor, not a ceiling’ – phonics are a minimum to work on and from which schools develop individual and creative exercises for their pupils. They felt it was worth considering what a similar floor might look like for writing.

Finally, given the pressures the current accountability system exerts on school, frontline participants highlighted the sector is necessarily risk averse. Participants mentioned they were trialling approaches with Year 5 as a starting point as it is a low-risk year group, without any formal examinations.

Technology:

Participants discussed the fact that technology may be changing our definition of what ‘writing’ means for young people. We may forget that children are engaging their writing skills daily on the internet, but writing a social media post falls outside the definition of writing in education. This discussion gave rise to a broader consideration of technology as a potential threat to writing outcomes. One participant highlighted that a significant challenge to literacy is the omnipresence of technology, situating students in a ‘bite-sized world’ where extended reading and writing is increasingly lost. Though the challenge that typing poses to developing orthographic skills was recognised, some participants encouraged a more optimistic approach to the rise of technology, citing its positive impact on children with SEND and the necessity of exercising strong technological skills for adult life. While one participant indicated that developing a progression map of digital skills from nursery onwards is a necessary compliment to a strong writing curriculum, this option would require sufficient capacity and funding for technology resources and devices.

The discussion briefly touched on the onset of artificial intelligence (AI) and the changes it is bringing to teaching practice, the classroom and children’s home lives. It was felt that current tools available make expert teachers more expert and novice teachers less likely to develop their skills. Participants agreed on the need for parameters, guidance and regulation to ensure any tools are effective, reliable and safe.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD):

Finally, a major part of the discussion focused on the need for more CPD for teachers to improve their teaching of writing, alongside the capacity to undergo this training. Participants agreed that educators are lacking in the whole-school CPD required to understand not just the details of their own curriculum, but also what came before in a child’s learning and how to close the gaps. This is especially important for writing, as the assessments at the end of KS2 require the evaluation of a portfolio of written work which dramatically increases teachers’ workload. Despite a willingness to investigate their students’ writing journey to date and the most appropriate next steps, teachers do not have the time or space to do so.

One trust representative outlined the centralised approach they take in their schools where their English Director has been allocated time to develop training and then works with other teachers to develop their skills. This streamlined process saves time as individual teachers do not need to each research for themselves. They acknowledged the challenge for supporting supply cover; to tackle this, they have a webinar for newly arrived teachers to watch to give at least some training.

As with many areas of education, greater support and capacity for teachers to undergo high-quality CPD would facilitate improved outcomes.

Conclusion

The discussion identified several key challenges that must be overcome in order to improve writing outcomes for all pupils:

- A lack of research
- An historic lack of political focus
- A lack of shared definition

These challenges are exacerbated by one another and have knock-on effects for the level of support and guidance available for teachers to understand how to effectively teach writing. Participants coalesced around a call for further research to inform this critical area of education.

On the policy side, there are two developments in the works which offer the potential to drive change in this area: the Writing Framework to be published in Summer 2025 and the Curriculum & Assessment Review's final report in autumn 2025. These publications will speak to the recommendation above for clearer communication from the Government and will hopefully fulfil some of the other needs outlined above including greater support for teachers.

As the Government looks to implement these plans, further discussions in light of these developments to progress understanding of challenges and opportunities would be a useful next step.