

Writing

Helping students to write

Task Writing in real life and in the classroom

List some things you have written in the past two weeks. What are the implications of your list for the English language classroom?

Commentary

The role of writing in everyday life has changed quite dramatically over recent decades. When selecting work for students, you need to be clear about whether it is useful practice. These issues are discussed in the next section.

Writing in everyday life

Whereas, in the early 1990s, many people wrote very little day by day, the advent and popularity of email, web forums, Internet messenger services and text messaging has meant that there is now a huge increase in written communication. Whether this growth and popularity will continue as new technology offers easier, cheaper and faster video and voice connections is not clear.

This new kind of communication has its own peculiar rules and rituals, and in some cases has evolved its own shorthand, abbreviations and lexis, often because of the perceived need to write quickly or within a limited word/character count. You can buy little dictionaries of text-message conventions and abbreviations. There are also new ways of expressing oneself. I can now communicate instantly across the world and use a little picture of a cartoon face to express my reaction to something written by my friend. Is that writing?

Beyond these new ways of communicating, many people actually do very little writing in day-to-day life, and a great deal of what they do write is quite short:

Brief notes to friends or colleagues, answers on question forms, diary entries, postcards, etc. The need for longer, formal written work seems to have lessened over the years, and this is reflected in many classrooms where writing activities are perhaps less often found than those for other skills.

Writing in the classroom

Despite the points raised above, there may still be good reasons why it is useful to include work on writing in a course:

- Many students have specific needs that require them to work on writing skills: academic study, examination preparation and Business English are three common areas where written work is still very important.
- At the most basic level, your students are likely to be involved in taking down notes in lessons such as yours; this is a skill that is worth focusing on.
- Writing involves a different kind of mental process. There is more time to think, to reflect, to prepare, to rehearse, to make mistakes and to find alternative and better solutions.
- It can give you a break, quietens down a noisy class, change the mood and pace of a lesson, etc.

Much writing work in the classroom falls on a continuum of how much restriction, help and control is offered, from copying to unguided writing.

1.	Copying	Students practise forming letter shapes in a handwriting book, note down substitution tables from the board, copy examples from a textbook, etc.
2.	Doing exercises	Students write single words phrases, sentences, etc. in response to very tightly focused tasks with limited options and limited opportunities for creativity or getting things wrong.
3.	Guided writing	You guide students to write longer texts in quite restricted or controlled tasks by offering samples, models, possibly useful language items! advice, organisational frameworks, etc.
4.	Process writing	Students write what they want to, with help,

		encouragement and feedback from you and others throughout the process of choosing a topic, gathering ideas, organizing thoughts, drafting, etc.
5.	Unguided writing	Students write freely without overt guidance, assistance or feedback during the writing process, though a title or task may be set, and work may be 'marked' later.