

Writer's Journals – a place to store the tools children need for writing

Jamie Grossmith, teacher at Belmont Primary in Grantham, explains how creating a Writer's Journal (a magpie book full of key writing tools) can help children become avid writers.



Pie often speaks about the ways in which writers are always on the lookout for a great idea in readiness to write – by doing so, their stories and poems come alive: *“Writers act like thieves ... young writers can be taught how to raid their reading to improve their writing.”*

Gathering these ideas in a notebook is a valuable way to support the developing writer. Since working with Pie in 2008, I have developed Writer's Journals with children in my class. In these books, we learn and try things out before committing them into longer pieces of writing.

A storehouse of creativity and experimentation

These journals are a storehouse of ideas and creativity. When reading, the children are encouraged to “magpie” favourite words and phrases for use later on. In doing so, they have a place where ideas can be selected and chosen for a specific purpose, rather than having to think of these on the spot. Almost immediately, children become critical about their word choices and start to think about choosing the right word, at the right time, to do the right job.

By having a storehouse to refer to, children are better able to emulate authors and hone their technique as a writer. This transference of reading into writing helps them to find their writing confidence and unlocks the writer within them.

The journal also provides a safe place to experiment with ideas and to play with words and language. By having the freedom to explore, be creative and take risks, the children develop a love for words, language and writing.

Feedback is always offered, and we often sit together and shape ideas through mutual discussion and conversation. The pencil is the tool we use to shape the ideas.

A point of reference and a badge of pride

Included in the journals are pages which model the use of specific grammatical features. If a child has a page of sentences modelling how to use a semicolon correctly then, when they are editing, they have a point of reference for themselves. These examples are drawn from shared reading, modelled by the class teacher and imitated by the children. In this way grammar teaching is “live” and not an isolated experience.

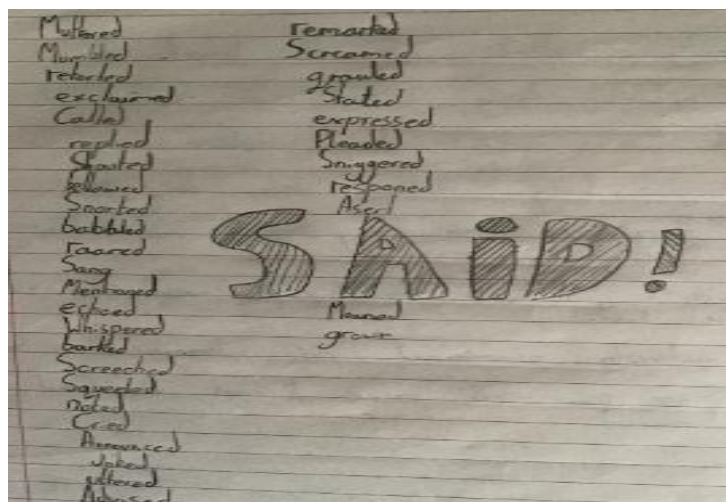
The children are allowed to personalise their journals in whatever way they wish. This develops a sense of ownership and motivation for collecting and presenting their ideas. The children are quietly competitive in gathering as many ideas as possible or decorating their work as brightly as they can. They are proud to share their books with any visitors that come to the classroom and are always willing to read their work aloud.

Inside the Writer’s Journal

Here are some examples of what they look like. The children in my class chose these 10 activities as the ones that they found the most useful in developing their writing.

1. Synonyms for common words

Gathering synonyms (and antonyms) is a really easy way to start filling a Writer’s Toolbox. Here, Ashlin has found many possible alternative words for *said*. Discussion relating to the best word choice is much easier when there are a number of alternatives.



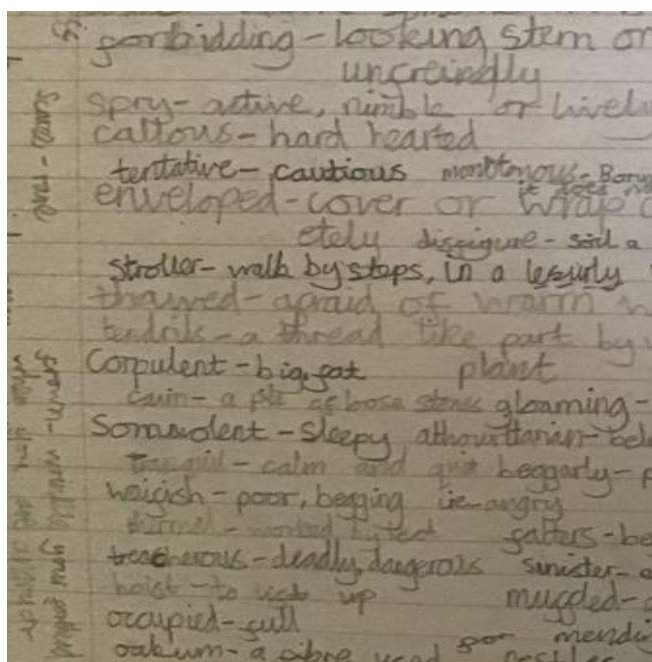
2. The scale of intensity

frozen
freezing
hypothermic
numb
perishing
shivering
bitter
cold
parky
cool

Sophie gathered synonyms for *cold* and ordered them from *the coldest cold word* to the *warmest cold word*. She was then able to choose words for a specific effect and express subtleties in meaning.

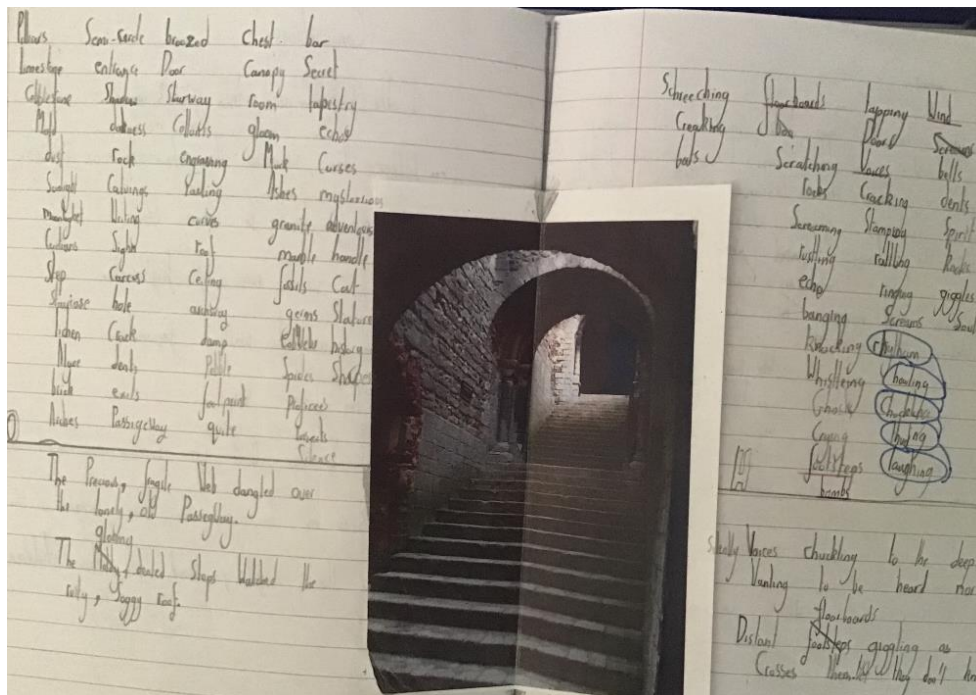
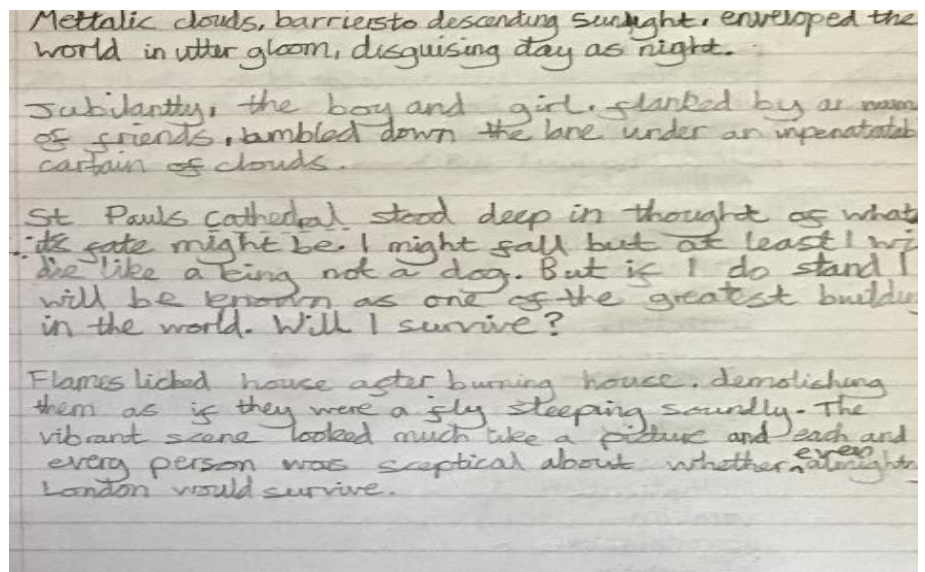
3. Collecting interesting words (tier 2 language)

Tier 2 language, drawn from our shared reading, is taught in context each week with simple actions to accompany definitions. Jacob developed a fascination for interesting words and language and became an avid magpie when reading. He likes to call them *wow words* but he knows that a word is only effective if it is just the right word to suit the context it is being used in.



4. Magpied treasure

Magpied treasure is using great ideas from that children pick up in their reading and using them in their writing. Ideas can be imitated or adapted to suit a particular audience, purpose or effect. Here is an examples of Joseph doing this.

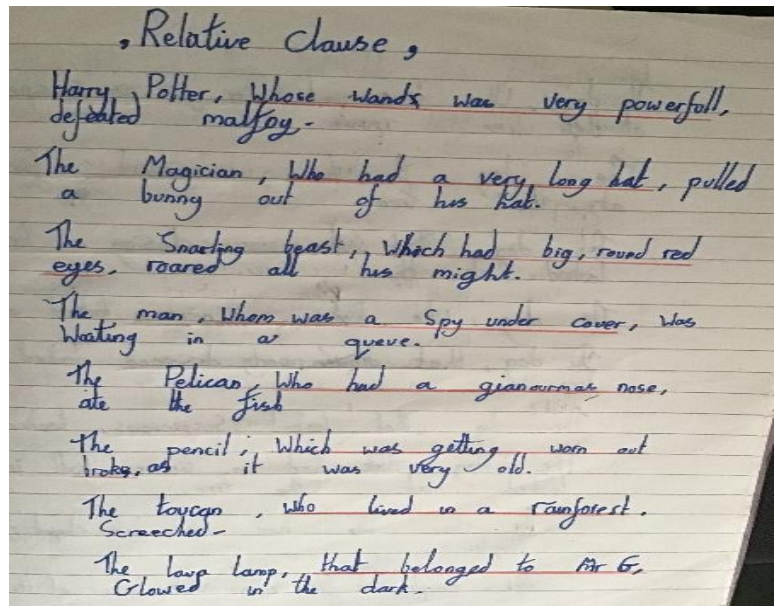


5. Exploring images

Eliza looked carefully at the image and thought about observation, imagination, sensation, and emotion when developing her responses to it.

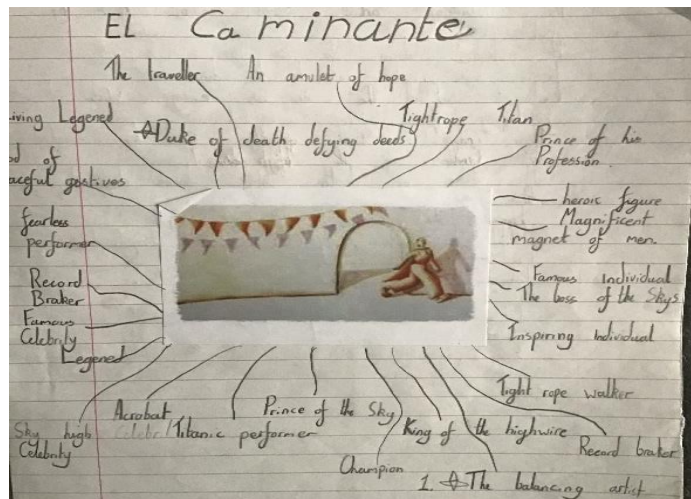
6. Innovating model sentences

Here, a sentence using a relative clause was used as a model. Then Paulina imitated it in a number of ways.



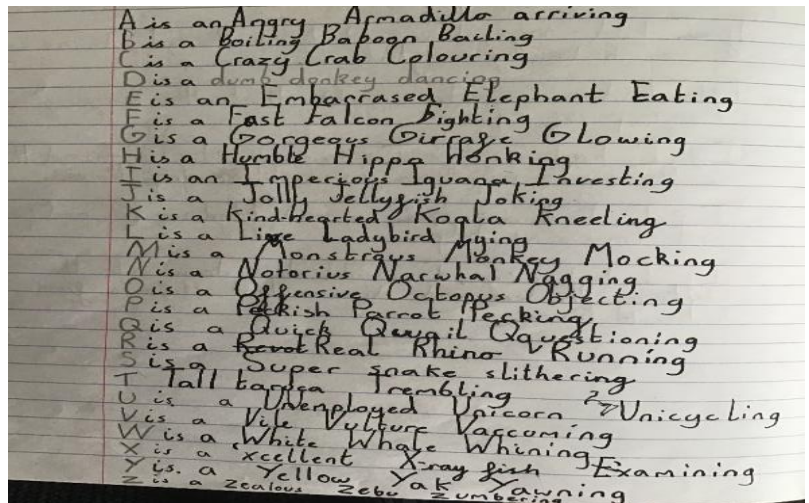
7. Name it!

Here, Lewis has moved beyond the writer's trick of naming exactly what is being talked about to paint a picture (e.g. it's not a car, it's a Ford Focus) and has explored the different ways in which he can refer to the tightrope walker "El Caminante" without actually using his name, but by describing him.

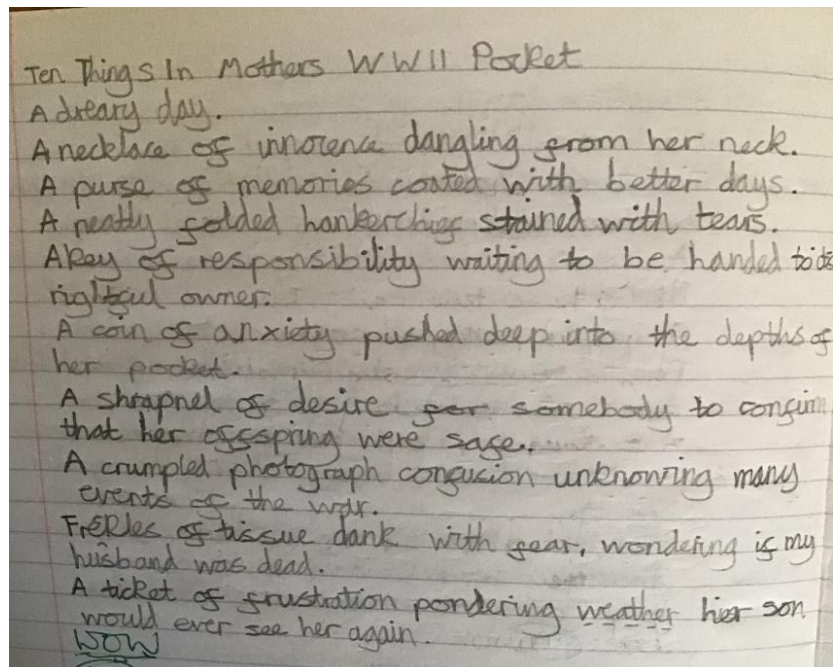


8. Quick-write poetry

Here, Justas has used one of our creative games to write an animal alphabet poem.



This is Jacob's response to our work on the evacuation of children in World War II and how a mother would feel. Here you can see the structure of Ian McMillian's poem "Ten Things found in a Wizard's Pocket" ([read here](#)) combined with Pie's creative game "City of Stars" ([read here](#)).



If I were in need of help I would appreciate for you to give me extra help repairing the automaton.

Should I not get my notebook I will not have that final link with my father. It's like when I hold the book I feel that special connection between me and my father.

Of course the significant matter is discovering the secrets that lie within the pages of the notebook.

I am very determined to be a magician and repair the automaton.

I am curious to see discover the secret that my father has hidden.

I'm so desperate to retrieve my notebook since I will never be able to complete my invention.

I need that the notebook especially because it has the answers

9. Quick-write narrative

Eliza has thought carefully about the reasons Hugo Cabret may give in order to retrieve his notebook from the toy seller. She has already adopted a more formal register as she begins to construct her arguments.

10. Tell me more ...

Jordan was a reluctant writer. His Writer's Journal has provided him with a safe place to explore and shape his ideas. He's enjoyed the freedom it's given him to be creative, before putting pen to paper in his English book. He relished the opportunity to share and talk through his ideas. The phrase "Tell me more about ..." really helped him to develop his thinking about different aspects of his writing.

What bit of it?
It's lustrous beckons me closer.

lours. Colours.

③ A glass ball lays in front of me it beckons me closer and closer and closer. Light flies into my eyes. Walk not noing what is happening.

A tall tornado surrounds me. All of a sudden I was alone with not a clue in the world were I was. Air flies up my nose and out my ears. Fear flows through my Vein. Who can stop this sorrow and pain? They scream for help but what can I do? I am alone. Will I ever escape or was this my fate, that someone else has planned.

A glass ball lays in front of me it's lustrous beckons me closer, closer and closer. Light glides into my eyes. I walk not noing what is happening.

State every

Crafting the writing

The Writer's Journal has certainly changed the way I teach writing and the ways in which I expect the children to write. We spend far longer exploring the craft of writing in its many forms rather than ploughing straight on and writing in our English books. I have seen the power of this book in developing the individual as a confident independent writer through exploration, experimentation and experience and shall continue to refine and develop these over the years to come.

If you are interested in discovering more, check out our twitter feed @EmporiumBelmont where I post examples of work from our school.

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