

35 Strategies for Supporting Weak Writers

1. Oral rehearsal

Provide warm-up opportunities. Talking before writing helps weaker writers to have something to say - often they can compose a sentence in their head but not on paper. Key words are more likely to be taken into pupils' long-term vocabulary if spoken.

2. Drama

Role play can help weak writers to generate ideas, especially when asked to write from another person's point of view. Debate can be used to generate for and against arguments. Key words and sentence starters can be given for oral activities.

3. Visual stimuli

Visual stimuli can help to prompt pupils who struggle to generate vocabulary and ideas. Images can be printed on writing frames, postcards, OHTs etc. Key words are more effective when displayed with icons.

4. Props

Objects can stimulate ideas and writing e.g. WW1 memorabilia. 'Story-sacks' (bags of items revealed one by one) might be used in English, History, Drama.

5. Exemplar pieces

Ensure pupils have an idea about what the written outcome should resemble - show examples of that type of writing. Shared reading of an OHP often found to be more effective than copies in front of pupils. Time needs to be built into lessons for this.

6. Provide a recipe

Identify the key features of the type of writing pupils are required to do - at word, sentence and text level. e.g. Recipe: present tense, short sentences, chronological order.

7. Real tasks for real audiences

Research has shown that weaker writers perform better when they draw on real experiences and have a clear sense of who they are writing for. Use FAP as a checklist for form, audience, purpose.

8. Modelling

Model on the board or OHP the thought processes you go through as you write. This helps to demystify writing. Works well with short exam questions on OHP or openings to longer pieces.

9. Correcting the teacher

Modelling can be extended into group composition by asking the group to critique the writing or contribute their ideas.

10. Peer composition

It can be much less intimidating writing in pairs - this makes weak writers feel less exposed.

11. Presentation

Separate presentation issues from content - weaker writers confuse them and may use frustration with presentation as an avoidance tactic.

12. Mini - whiteboards

These A4 or A5 boards allow mistakes to be erased and prevent paper from endlessly being screwed up. Can be photocopied.

13. Alternatives to A4

Some reluctant writers are phased by A4 lined paper and may not be well-equipped. Try alternative colours, sizes, pens etc. Post-its and OHTs allow work to be easily transferred to the front. Vary the format of worksheets - consider A3 size.

14. Writing mats

These are double-sided A3 laminated sheets of key words, writing frames, equations and diagrams for a particular topic. They help to bring key words off the wall and prevent continual requests for paper to lean on.

15. Left-handed writers

Left - handers will sometimes find it easier to miss every other line and when possible, use pencil (doesn't smudge) and portrait format. Paper should be diagonally leaning to the right on the desk.

16. Notemaking

Model notetaking and offer a variety of frames for making notes. Weak writers do not see the difference between writing and notes. The ability to be concise under timed conditions is key to exams and takes lots of practice.

17. Planning

Introduce students to a variety of planning formats. Model how you plan. Never allow pupils to begin extended writing without a plan of some kind. Weaker writers respond well to a routine of planning.

18. The 6 W's

Can be used to help pupils find something to say - Who, What, When, Where, Why, How.

19. Sequencing activities

These encourage pupils to do the thinking and help weaker writers to organise their ideas. Strips containing words, phrases or whole sentences are ordered by pupils. These can either be expanded into a full answer or stuck down as an alternative to handwriting.

20. Post-its

Pupils write ideas on post-its which can be moved about into the right order to form a plan. Good for kinaesthetic learners.

21. Writing frames

Need to be differentiated, otherwise developing writers will be held back. Good for writers who write vast quantities with little content.

22. Word count

Specify the amount of words allowed. To encourage conciseness, make rambling writers reduce their work to 5 sentences, 5 bullet points, or even 5 words. This forces them to cut out unnecessary words and works very well on a computer.

23. Shaping paragraphs

If pupils are beyond a writing frame but still need support, replace frame with paragraph headings, bullet points, key questions or sentence starters.

24. Mr Pee

Helps pupils to structure a paragraph in the right order - Point, Evidence, Explanation.

25. Cloze

When using cloze passages, try to ensure that the answers cannot be guessed e.g. give too many (or no) answers or blank out phrases instead of single words.

26. Key words

Developing a useful subject vocabulary that aids learning is more of a priority than spelling for weak writers. Lesson starters are a good place to play key words definition games and activate pupils' prior learning. Constant recap is vital to extending vocabulary.

27. Locating key words

Place key words and sentence starters on the appropriate part of the writing frame to ensure they get used. Alternatively, put the words on strips which can be moved about.

28. Link words

Give link words and phrases as well as key words - these help to develop more sophisticated thinking and writing e.g. because, therefore, but, next, so, finally, also.

29. Synonyms

If vocabulary is limited, give lists of alternative words with the same meaning. Can make a big difference to verbs e.g. went = walked, ran, strolled, rushed, raced.

30. ICT

When students word-process, encourage them to highlight separate points (paragraphs) or key words using different fonts and shading. Works well with kinesthetic learners.

31. Drawing

Some weak writers have been found to perform better if they draw illustrations or cartoons alongside their work.

32. Display

Has been found to be effective when it identifies stages in the process of writing or planning e.g. How to write up an experiment steps 1-5.

33. Scribing

Weak writers can quickly become reliant on LSA as scribe or on over-writing. A combination/withdrawal approach is advisable.

34. Rereading

Weak writers rarely read back over what they have written. Encourage students to read work aloud to check for missing words, wrong words, etc.

35. Praise

Weaker writers do respond to praise but are hard to motivate. Opportunities for success in writing activities in order help to develop a 'can do' mentality. Try to make writing tasks progressively demanding so that pupils can build up skills.