

# The impact of writing and questioning frames on the teaching and learning process

**Nigel Wickham,**  
Failsworth School,  
Failsworth, Oldham

---

## > Aim

---

How do writing and questioning frames within a School Improvement Project impact on classroom practice and more effective teaching and learning?

## > Dimensions of this Case Study

---

The research project was based on the experiences of staff and students over one academic year at a large comprehensive school in an urban area. It was carried out within a range of curriculum and year-group contexts. The evaluation was planned and carried out by a team of five teachers with considerable support from the Oldham LEA Adviser.

## > Summary of Findings for this Case Study

---

- There was clear evidence that using writing frames raised student attainment and closed the gap between teacher exposition and written student outcomes.
- Writing frames were used effectively for persuasive writing, report analysis, discussion work and preparation for examination questions.
- The skill of the teacher in choosing when and where to introduce writing frames was critical to their effective use by students.
- Subject specific or question specific writing frames were developed alongside the genre frames. These have been successful in improving GCSE coursework grades.
- It proved to be important that differentiating and gradually withdrawing the use of writing frames were considered even in the early planning stages.
- Teacher expertise proved critical in planning, delivering and evaluating the impact of writing and questioning frames.
- Question and answer sessions in the classroom were generally not planned in any great detail but teachers were keen to develop this part of their work.

## Introduction

---

A writing frame is defined in this report as “A template consisting of starters, connectives and sentence modifiers which offer children a structure for communicating what they want to say” [1]. Students have the opportunity to carry out a dialogue with a piece of paper to ensure that their written work is relevant and pertinent to the question being asked.

A questioning frame is defined as a process through which the teacher takes the students to support and enhance the quality of question and answer sessions in the classroom.

My research was based on evidence from quantitative data which included GCSE performance, successive national curriculum level judgements for year 6-7 students and successive level assessments over the course of a literacy summer school.

Qualitative data came from lesson observations, interviews with staff and information from students.

## Methodology

---

Writing frames had been introduced throughout the school in 1998 as part of a wider study looking at the impact of a whole school literacy policy. My research concentrated on the impact of writing frames on the teaching and learning process but conclusions about their impact had to be drawn in the context of the wider study.

I was also keen to discover teachers’ views about:

- the effectiveness of question and answer sessions in the classroom;
- their attitudes to developing this practice; and
- what further development might involve.

I was especially interested in the link between questioning and writing frames when used together in the same lesson.

Evidence was gathered through a range of methods including interviews with staff and students, observation of lessons and departmental reviews. To ensure a broad and balanced target group external data from NFER, national tests and GCSE results was considered when selecting students and classes to be involved in the project.

## Teachers’ views

---

### Writing Frames

All 56 teachers interviewed were in favour of using writing frames. Some were using them already but the vast majority were keen to include them in their planning more frequently. Some departments had compiled a booklet to which all members had contributed with perceived benefits, e.g. “Frames are not as effective in isolation” and we “need to share the burden across departments”. Teachers had begun to develop a series of subject and question specific frames to be used alongside the genre examples, proposed by Wray and Lewis [1].

Other perceived benefits included:

- teachers felt that the use of writing frames had enhanced the learning process by helping students to present arguments more logically in a well structured format;
- they enabled lower attaining students to achieve the same subject outcomes as the higher achievers but using a different vocabulary;
- differentiated frames were thought to be capable of supporting students to achieve the next NC level. In Spanish, students had moved from Level 5 to 6 by using a frame either to order their subject content or as a clear, logical way of presenting their work, making it easier to spot and correct their own mistakes;
- student motivation had improved, for example, “Everyone in a mixed ability class completed the task and improved their marks” and “Out of each term’s work, students selected their best piece and 80% picked the one with the frame”;
- many staff saw a connection with developing teaching and learning styles (TLS). A wider variety of TLS had been found to lead to greater levels of understanding but not necessarily to better written responses. It was thought that writing frames could be used to address this problem;
- many staff used writing frames to improve the structure and presentation of students’ work at the end of a topic.

Perceived drawbacks included:

- the writing frames could be pulled off the shelf and used as worksheets without planning or modelling, lessening their impact on the pupils

and reducing their effectiveness as a teaching tool;

- pre-prepared frames could be too inflexible and needed to be adapted to suit different subject areas and topics and to cater for the ability range within a class;
- pupils could become too reliant on the writing frames, necessitating a strategy for the withdrawal of writing frames for most students by the end of KS3. Pupils needed to see writing without the need of a writing frame as a goal.

## Question Frames

Teachers were less enthusiastic about the use and effectiveness of questioning frames.

Although the link between writing and questioning frames was thought by the teachers to be potentially strong, they had found no evidence to support this notion.

Perceived drawbacks included:

- responses varied for class and topic but the general feeling was that too much depended on the performance of the teacher;
- students needed some knowledge of the subject of the question frame for the latter to be effective.

## Students' views

---

### Writing Frames

Younger students (KS3) overwhelmingly indicated that they liked using writing frames as a useful alternative to copying and to blank sheets of paper. However, they did not want to use them all the time. The students felt that the frames reinforced the teacher's instructions.

Representatives from two Year 7 classes, 17 in total, responded to a series of questions put to them by the school's Link Adviser. There were individual case studies from Years 9, 10 & 11. Their views were used as part of the teaching and learning process throughout this project.

KS4 students also valued writing frames. When used in conjunction with examination preparation and GCSE coursework, the students felt the support of a writing frame helped them towards more structured answers and better grades.

Students did not regard the frames as worksheets when they were introduced into the lessons to support and enhance the quality of their written work. In fact, a key issue to emerge from the views of teachers and students was that the frames should be used judiciously and not as a substitute for worksheets.

Perceived drawbacks:

- writing frames could restrict the answers of some students but comparisons between answers with and without frames showed many students, very effectively, how to improve their own work.

## Question Frames

Students were much less aware of the use of questioning frames. They said that they never felt pressurised in class to answer questions and did not like it when pushed to give more detail. They accepted that the opportunity to explain themselves helped their understanding of the topic.

## Classroom observation

---

Twelve lessons were observed across the curriculum, age and ability ranges. There was much evidence of the successful use of writing frames. A clear understanding of the task was apparent as was a feeling of partnership between the teachers and the students. The writing frames were seen to be helpful and straightforward and students were keen to follow the sentence starters to structure their work. This led to more individual and creative thinking in response to some of the questions set in class and resulted in a higher standard of work across the whole class. Students produced written work that was organised, relevant and complete.

Writing frames were most effective in lessons where there was clear progression from the teaching and the learning activity into the written task. The frame was then viewed as a supportive tool that could lead to a better piece of written work. Students were shown where frames had been used successfully, using work done without the benefit of a frame for comparison. Most students observed appeared to like using writing frames.

Three lessons observed had a questioning frame focus. On each occasion the teacher attempted to model the question and answer session to a later piece of writing. The teachers were most successful when they had prepared the class for the session by giving them tasks in pairs or small groups first. This gave the students a foundation of knowledge to draw upon when questioned in front of the whole class and helped to bring about longer and more detailed responses. These lessons also showed the importance of planning question and answer sessions carefully.

In these sessions boys were found to give more thoughtful answers than expected and girls joined in the discussions more frequently than they had before. Written work produced after these sessions was of a higher standard than before, but as writing frames were used alongside, no firm conclusions could be drawn.

## Quantitative findings

- GCSE History coursework of 22 Year 11 students, was assessed and moderated. In the questions where writing frames had been used the final marks, scored by each candidate, were 2 grades higher than for the questions where writing frames had not been used. (Average score 55% compared with 35%).

22 GCSE students – subject History Average Scores	
YELLIS predicted grade	E
Average achieved grade	E
Coursework mark without the use of writing frames	35%
Coursework mark with the use of writing frames	55%

- Students were chosen for a 2-week literacy booster programme on the basis of their written work not being a secure Level 4. The focus of the programme was the use of writing and questioning frames. At the end of the 2 weeks the writing of all the students was assessed as a secure Level 4.

31 literacy summer school students	
Beginning of summer school	
Average reading age	9.36
Average spelling age	9.48
End of summer school	
Average reading age	9.63
Average spelling age	9.54

- For a target group of 25 Year 7 students, teachers from all subjects were asked to focus on the use of writing frames. Levelled assessments in History and English showed an increased level of attainment where writing frames had been used. Teachers reported a similar pattern across the curriculum, e.g. RE, MFL and Science.

Year 7 Average scores	
KS2 English national tests	3.3
<i>End of Year 7</i>	
Teacher Assessment (English)	3.65
Teacher Assessment (History)	3.75
<i>Levelled assessment</i>	
using a writing frame (English)	3.9
using a writing frame (History)	4.1

- Twenty students in Year 10 were given a GCSE question and all used a writing frame to structure their answers. Each pupil achieved a higher grade than in previous assessments when writing frames had not been used. Answers were found to be better structured and two different viewpoints had been argued more effectively.

#### CSE scores Year 10 assessment

7 students using the writing framework	6 A & 1 A* grades
Previous average grade	A/B
13 students using the framework	4 B & 9 C grades
Previous average grade	C/D

## Issues arising

- Teachers were keen to develop this part of their work and would welcome training.
- It was felt that written work could be permanently improved if the use of frames became normal practice in Key Stage 3. However, strategies needed to be devised for the withdrawal of frames for most students by the end of Key Stage 3.
- Further research was required to investigate the relationship between writing frames and question frames.

## Further reading

- **Lewis and Wray** [1996], Writing Frames: scaffolding children's non-fiction writing in a range of genres. Reading and Language Information Centre, Reading.[1]
- **Lewis and Wray** [1998], Writing across the Curriculum: frames to support learning. Reading and Language Information Centre, Reading.
- **Black and Wiliam** [1998], Inside the Black Box: Raising standards through classroom assessment, King's College London. [2]
- First Steps, Education Department of Western Australia, Rigby Heinemann, Port Melbourne, Victoria.

## Acknowledgements

- Failsworth School Curriculum Delivery Team:- Samantha Coy, Christopher Lamb, Victoria Catton and Diane Duguid
- Members of staff at Failsworth School, Oldham LEA Adviser – Sylvia McClean

## Contact

---

Nigel Wickham, Curriculum Project Manager, Failsworth School, Brierley Avenue, Manchester M35 9HA

[www.teach-tta.gov.uk](http://www.teach-tta.gov.uk)

Publication number 128/7-00

Further copies of this summary are available from TTA publications 0845 606 0323