The Message and the Means:  
The writer’s voice, the editor’s discipline and the audience’s ear

A paper presented by Rodney Martin  
at the 2006 ALEA National Conference in Darwin, Australia.

This paper addresses the difficulty many teachers face in implementing writing curricula that require a functional application of language conventions. It gives teachers practical insights and greater confidence in their understanding and teaching of writing. The content is based on the professional knowledge and experience of the presenter evidenced by his international literary success as an author, editor and educator.

The ability to read and listen is essential for gaining access to knowledge, but the ability to speak and write often determines our capacity to influence others. Yet public speaking remains a great fear and writing a severe limitation to many (if not most) people. Professional writers and speakers are a specialised minority even in societies that are considered to have comparatively high levels of literacy.

We usually know the message we want to communicate but we fumble the means of communication. What do the specialised minority know that the masses do not and how can teachers help children to develop these skills and knowledge?

This paper presents a classroom strategy that has children engage with language in a manner that has each aspect of literacy presented in a contextualised (functional) way— that is, the relevance of any knowledge or skills being presented must clearly make practical sense to the learner. The objective is to give meaning to various elements of language knowledge so they become tools the learner can understand and use for a desired effect.

The ‘English’ textbook
The teaching of language knowledge in the primary years from the 1950s – 1970s was often programmed via a standard textbook. In the 1950s, a textbook series commonly used was ‘Active English’ (which students often nicknamed *Inactive English*). In the 1960s and early 1970s, a popular textbook was ‘Let’s Make English Live’ (which my students nicknamed *Let’s Make English Die*). Essentially students saw little relationship between the activities undertaken through the textbooks and the reality of their writing.

From the late 1970s to the 1990s, the textbook seemed to disappear from classrooms, and language skills were deemed to be taught as and when needed in association with ‘themes’ that were the basis of writing projects. At the same time, teachers still expressed a need for regular language skill activities and we saw the emergence of the ‘black line master’ activity sheets. From the evidence of photocopying licence revenue collected by the Copyright Agency Limited, the sales of black line master products published to meet this demand, and the copy paper budgets assigned to classrooms for this purpose, we can surmise that black line master activity sheets have replaced the textbook.
A problem with the use of photocopied activity sheets is that there is no guarantee that the sheets presented to students over a year collectively offer a cohesive scope and sequence or syllabus that serves valid educational outcomes. Each activity sheet is usually an entity in its own right without necessarily having any relevance to other aspects of classroom instruction.

Of course, the traditional English textbook also did not necessarily draw any parallel between skills taught and writing outcomes. Children’s nicknames for such textbooks expressed their inability to see any relevance in the matter being taught and the real use of the language.

**Contextualised learning**

In the early 1980s, Donald Graves among others introduced the concept of giving writing instruction relevance to children by focusing on and embedding it within the writing process.

In the 1990s, functional grammarians such as Beverly Derewianka focused attention on the understanding of writing through text types – their purpose and features.

While each of the above approaches has influenced classroom practice, the continued proliferation of the black line master activity sheet in classrooms suggests that they have not reached the mainstream of instructional practice. Given the logic and seemingly pragmatic nature of process writing and modelling through text types, why haven’t teachers adopted these strategies en masse? In countless interviews with teachers and discussions within the context of professional development around the world, the author has met some recurring themes that point to the causes.

**The time imperative**

Teachers claim that one of their greatest concerns is their lack of time – too much to do in too little time. Classroom strategies such as ‘process writing’ are seen as requiring more time than they have available to plan and implement given the complexities of outcomes-based education. The fundamental element of classroom management and planning becomes a major obstacle.

**Lack of insight/confidence**

Functional grammar (and traditional Latinate grammar) remains a mystery to many contemporary teachers. While they can embrace the various text types with regard to their style and purpose, discourse about the language is beyond the preservice training and the inservice professional development offered to teachers.

**Which pedagogy?**

The polarisation of pedagogical debate about literacy education continues. Phonics and grammar versus whole language, whether the nomenclature is accurate or relevant or not, are still argued (‘It’s wrong if you can’t write’ The Weekend Australian, May 2006) as if they are mutually exclusive alternatives. A seemingly never-ending polarisation might
appeal to academics and journalists whose employment thrives on debate, but it fails teachers and children who need pragmatism when they arrive at school on Monday.

**A proposed solution**
The traditional English textbook answered teachers’ concerns about classroom management and planning. It was simple to administer and gave confidence that the syllabus was being covered. However, it lacked relevance to the learner and failed to make sense of the matter being taught. Black line masters give teachers benefits similar to those claimed for the traditional textbook, but also fail for similar reasons and fragment content even more so.

The more valid pedagogies of *process writing* and *functional grammar* solve the problem of relevance to the learner, but fail when it comes to teachers’ perceptions of their practicality in the classroom. In effect, classroom strategies have failed to link the message with the means teachers feel they have available to them.

Let us consider an approach that offers teachers and students the ordered planning and implementation offered by the English textbook, but ensures a marriage of content and meaning. No aspect of language knowledge would be presented to children unless it is applied to a listening, speaking, reading or writing outcome with which the learner is involved.

**Structure and management**
Consider a series of language projects presented in a textbook. The projects are similar in design but vary greatly in content. Each project must offer:

- A text that models a particular text type or writing style
- Comprehension activities that expand children’s understanding of the nature and purpose of the text
- Discourse on the text, exposing the author’s technique, style and application of language knowledge
- A writing project that involves the generation of ideas, planning, drafting and editing modelled on the text
- The use of references to explore meanings and gain insights into the language use required for the writing project
- Word and sentence level activities drawn from usage in the model text and applied to the writing project
- Performance and publication to present writing to an audience

**Content**
It is assumed that:

- A scope and sequence of the content of the projects would be supplied so the teacher has a reference to all elements of language presented throughout the projects
- All text types would be modelled throughout the series of projects
SAMPLE STUDY UNIT
A text sample needs to be brief and relevant to the readers, but must also represent the
text type and style to be studied. Given that the study unit might be presented to a whole
class or at least a group of students, it is recommended that the text complexity be below
the instructional reading level of the group. Remember, children’s writing is usually at a
much lesser level of complexity than what they can read.

Here is sample text model that might be introduced in a shared reading session.

**DISCUSSION: Different views**

*What to Do with the Prize Money*

**Teacher**
Our class entered a drawing competition and Linus’s drawing won. The prize
was a lot of money and it was sent to the school. What should happen to the
prize money?

**Linus**
I think I should use the money to go to a special art school. I must be talented
or I would not have won the prize. So I should use this money to improve my
talent.

**Janelle**
We should use the money Linus won for a class journey to the art gallery. We
entered the competition as a class, so I suggest that the money should go to
the whole class. Going to the art gallery would help us all to improve our
understanding of art.

**Jose**
I think we should spend the money on new sport equipment. Then the money
would go to the whole school! Our class is part of the school and the art
competition was a school activity.

**Matthew**
I agree that we should spend the money of something for the whole school, but
not on sports. The money came from a drawing competition, so we should
spend the money on art equipment for the school. Then we could do better
drawings.

**Lina**
Our school is wealthy. We live in a rich district. I believe we should donate the
money to a school that does not have much equipment. It would give those
children a chance to enter a drawing competition by following our example.
This would make us responsible citizens.

**Teacher**
We now have five different ideas for using the prize money. I think the class
should discuss these ideas and then vote for one idea. I will ask the principal to
do whatever idea gets the most votes.
Comprehension should allow an exploration of text to give students greater insight into its meaning and purpose. The following questions and activity take students from literal recall of detail, to understandings that need discussion and reading beyond the text.

Exploring the text
1. What sort of competition did Linus win? [Literal]
2. Why might you think that Linus is a confident person? [Inferential]
3. Whose idea would you vote for? Why? [Creative]
4. Why might discussion be a good way to solve the problem? [Critical]

Beyond the text
Newspapers often publish letters from readers who write their arguments about the same topic. This gives you different views about that topic.
- Look up the ‘Letters to the Editor’ section of your local newspaper. Find examples of people writing different opinions about the same topic.

Empowered writers have a sense of insight into the language as a tool of expression. This insight grows through experience and many iterations of working with words. Teachers can foster this insight through explicit exploration of how texts work in terms of structure, style and technique. Unfortunately, this kind of insight remains the precinct of professional writers, but a textbook can provide such information in a digestible manner.

The following example blends discourse about the text with process writing.

**WRITING WORKSHOP**

**Technique and style**

In a discussion, different people give their opinions and reasons on the same topic. In ‘What to Do with the Prize Money’, five children give their opinions in a discussion. Here are some hints on how to discuss your opinions. **What is the topic?**

A discussion must be about a topic. In an argument, the topic of a discussion is usually an issue or a problem. The introduction in the sample text explains the background to the discussion. Then the introduction presents the issue: ‘What should happen to the prize money?’

**Making an argument**

When making an argument, a person gives an opinion about a topic and a reason to support the opinion. It is important to explain the reasons for an opinion. This is how people convince the reader that their argument is correct.

**Words about thoughts**

Some verbs are useful for expressing feelings and thoughts. In the arguments, the ‘thinking’ verbs that the children use are believe, think, suggest, and agree.

**Ending the discussion**

A discussion needs some way of reaching agreement or a decision on the problem or issue. In the summary, the teacher explains how they will decide what to do about the problem.
Writing project

In groups of five or six, discuss a topic. Write an argument on what you believe about the topic.

Ideas

- A fitness test has shown that the children in your school are not as fit as they should be. What should be done to make the children fitter?
- A company gives a lot of money to your school for equipment. But the company sells food that is bad for children’s health. What should the school do?

Planning

- In your group, discuss the topic you have chosen. Tell each other your opinions.
- Share ideas on what reasons might be needed to make people agree with the opinions.
- Make notes about the suggestions your group members give you.

Organising

- Organise the ideas you noted in the group discussion.

Drafting

- Write your argument. Use your notes to make sure you don’t forget anything.

Editor’s hint

Be gentle

People often do not like it if a person sounds bossy in a discussion. It is a good idea to give your opinion in a gentle way. Here are some words to help you do this:

- Use verbs such as believe, suggest, might, could and think.

  I believe it might be a good idea to …
  I suggest that we …
  I think we could …

- Avoid words that sound bossy. Here are some examples:

  We must do this.
  We have to do it this way.
  I know I am right and that we should do it this way.
Activities focusing on specific language knowledge can be constructed so they are within the context of the reading and writing project. The skills might range from the ability to use references to find information about language, to explicit instruction in spelling, vocabulary and grammar. Note in the following activities how they can be drawn back to the context of the children’s writing or understanding of the text model.

**LANGUAGE SKILLS**

**Style guide**

Use your *Junior Writers Guide* to look up these topics.

**Verbs – feeling and thinking**

When people give an opinion in a discussion, they talk about what they feel and think about a topic. Here are some verbs we often use when we do this.

- think
- know
- feel
- love
- hate
- believe
- wish

- Look up verbs and find out more about words to use when you give an opinion.
- In your group, discuss whether each word would sound bossy or gentle.
- Check your writing project to see which feeling and thinking verbs you have used.

At this stage, students actually employ their classroom dictionary, thesaurus and style guide to find information relevant to their writing. At the same time they are learning to use such references and becoming familiar with their content and style.
Connectives

In a discussion you need to give reasons for your opinions. Connectives are words that are useful for connecting ideas like opinions and reasons. Here are some examples:

- because  so  if

• Look up connectives. Find out how writers use these words to link ideas in their sentences. Here is an example; in this sentence the word because connects two ideas:

  I think we should spend the money on sport equipment (opinion)  
  because our equipment is getting old (reason).

• Check your writing. Did you use these words to connect opinions and reasons?
Activities at the word level can be based on aspects of word use in the sample text model and then related to the students’ use of words in their writing. Each activity introduces a basis for students to proofread their writing project.

**Word knowledge**

**Vocabulary**

**Confusing words**

Many words sound the same but have different spellings and different meanings.

- whole – hole
- new – knew

- Discuss how you would use each of these words in a sentence.
- Talk about how you can remember which word is which.
- Find other words that are also related to these words? (Look under civ…)
- Write these words in your personal word book.

**connectives**

Connectives are words or phrases that link ideas within a text. They give the reader a signal about what is happening in the text.

In this example, the connectives are in bold type.

*At first,* Olivia thought she could eat chocolates for the rest of her life. She began nibbling the big bag of chocolates she got for her birthday. *After a while,* they all tasted the same and she didn’t feel so excited about them any more. *In the end,* she felt that she could not face another chocolate for the rest of her life.

The connectives *at first, after a while and in the end* tell you about the order that things are happening in time. They link the different parts of the text and help you to know where you are in the story.

**Apostrophe – ownership (’)**

The author used an apostrophe in the text. The apostrophe shows that something belonged to the student named Linus.

- Linus’s drawing won.

- Discuss what you think belonged to Linus.
- Look up apostrophe of possession in your *Junior Writers Guide*. Find out more about what this apostrophe means.
- Check your writing project. Should you have an apostrophe in any of your words.
Word knowledge

Word histories

This would make us responsible citizens.

The word *citizen* has an interesting history. It came from an old Roman word *civis*.

- Use your dictionary to find the meanings of these words.
  
  | city  | civilian |
  
- Discuss how these words are similar in meaning.
- Find other words that are also related to these words? (Look under *civ*…)

Grammar

could, should, would

Each of these words is used in the text.

| could | should | would |

These words are special. They are the only words in which the letters *ould* are pronounced /ood/ as in *wood*.

- Write these words in your personal word book.
- Look up *could/should/would* in your Junior Writers Guide.
- Find where each of these words has been used in the text.
- Check whether you have used them in your writing. Do they give your sentences the meaning you intended?

Spelling

Double consonants

Some words have a double consonant in the middle.

| suggest | happen | gallery | follow |

The double consonant usually has a short vowel come before it.

- Write these words in your personal word book.
- Add other words you know with a double consonant in the middle. Here are some examples:
  
  | funny | terrible | collect | carry | silly | little | matter | dinner | scissors |
  
- With a partner, test each other on the spelling of five words from your word lists.
- Check your writing for words that should have double letters. Use a spell checker if you are using a word processor.
Listening and speaking is often paid lip service (pardon the pun) in many classrooms in that explicit instruction is not provided about technique and style. Once again, this can be given relevance through the publication of a writing project. In this example, the listening and speaking is directed at the nature of the text being studied in the project.

### Spelling

**wh** = /h/

The letters **wh** are sometimes pronounced as /h/.

- **whole**

Here are some other **wh** words that have a /h/ sound.

- **wh**

- **who**
- **whose**
- **whom**

- **what**
- **when**
- **where**
- **which**
- **why**

- Write these **wh** words in your personal word book.
- Make a list of other **wh** words that you know. Here are some examples:
- **what**
- **when**
- **where**
- **which**
- **why**

- What do you notice about the beginning sounds of these words?
- What is different about the first group of words and the second group?

### Reaching the Audience

**Performance and publication**

Discussions are often done in front of an audience. This is called a debate. Usually there are two teams. One team agrees with the topic being discussed. The other team disagrees. At the end of the debate the audience (or some judges) vote to decide who won the debate.

**Action**

- Find a team that wrote arguments that were opposite to your beliefs on a topic.
- Practise reading your argument.
- Have a debate with the other team. The teams take turns for each member to speak.
- Have the rest of the class vote to see who convinced them that their argument was correct.

**Speech hints**

- Make sure that your team members are not all presenting the same arguments.
- As you read, sound as though you really believe your argument.
The above sample study unit demonstrates that any aspect of language knowledge can be taught and learned in a context of meaning. It employs an editor’s insight to a learning environment and exposes students to the professional trade secrets of writers.

How such a series of ideas might be implemented would be influenced by a teacher’s individual sense of organisation and the needs of a particular class of students. It is a smorgasbord of ideas presented within a sound pedagogical structure.

Such material would allow teachers and students to engage with the concept of the writer’s voice both as readers and writers. The questioning of the text involves thought and response at the literal, inferential, creative and critical levels of comprehension.

The support information and ideas introduce the editorial viewpoint – attention to technique and style in the use of language for a purpose.

The student is reminded of audience and purpose as a reader, a writer and a speaker.

The structure of the material suggests a basis for practical planning and implementation by the teacher – an uncomplicated means of helping students to get the message about how language works.

Rodney Martin  
DipT(Adv), BEd, MBA, FEA  
May, 2006

Bibliography
3. Donnelly, Kevin, It’s wrong if you can’t write, The Weekend Australian, 26 Inquirer, May 27-28 2006