



Structured Writing: Breaking the Mould

Writing frames undoubtedly have their uses, but they can also limit the creative talents of the more able. Freeing up pupils to generate their own ideas and apply them using their own structures should become a priority.

By **Frank Bruce**

In the 1950s and before, pupils were taught formal ways of writing including everything from beginning a story to precise ways of ending letters. This didactic approach manifested itself in O'level essays in which examiners point-marked the same use of grammar, the same features of style, very often in exactly the same place, page after page, script after script. This stiff upper lip approach helped sustain a standard and purity of language in colonial days, but didn't suit the mood of a changing, modern Britain. The swinging sixties brought with it a looser, 'learn by experience' approach to extended writing, a disintegration of common expectations without any models at all.

The writing frame

Modern use of writing frames evolved with the push to raise standards through the introduction of the National Curriculum and, more recently, the Literacy Strategy. It is expected that pupils will be taught different styles of writing to equip them with the skills needed by employers of the future.

They should be able to recognise, understand and create report documents, discussions and explanations, using appropriate styles. Teachers have often shared writing frames useful in their subjects, giving pointers about how to answer specific essay questions such as characteristics of the rainforest or the causes of world war two. The use of attainment targets has in some cases led to the production of specific writing frames to address and meet certain target levels. This has particularly been the case with regard to Key Stage 3 SATS and GCSE examinations.

The current situation

The use of writing frames has undoubtedly led to rising standards in literacy and given structure to pupils' writing. However, the Tomlinson report* and a number of OFSTED school inspection reports have highlighted the over-use of writing frames. The over-use of frames leads to monotonous lessons which neither stretch the abilities of the more able, nor prepare pupils for the varied diet of tasks they will be required to undertake in the world of

Advantages of writing frames

- Provide a structure.
- Give a framework on which to hang ideas.
- Help pupils to extend their answers.
- Can provide suitable sentence starters.
- Help to teach pupils about appropriate genres of writing.
- Direct writing towards a purpose.
- Focus on including the sections needed to reach a level or grade.
- Essential component in the Literacy Strategy, which has raised standards.
- Provides support for the less able.
- Can be differentiated to stretch the more able.
- A range of frames can be provided to allow pupil choice.

work. The resulting trend is towards a much more flexible approach to extended writing. Those who can should be encouraged to set free their thoughts and produce their own extended work. That work still requires a structure, but it does not need to be as rigid as current writing frames steer. Even giving a choice of frames can limit the creative talents of the more able. Therefore, freeing up pupils to generate their own ideas and apply them using their own structures should become a priority.

*14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Interim Report February 2004 by Mike Tomlinson

LogoVisual techniques (LVT)

LogoVisual techniques allow for a fresh approach. Essentially the class works in groups around portable whiteboards and uses sets of MagNotes to generate their ideas. This provides an interactive group focus rather than a whole class (often more didactic) approach. The idea is to begin with a key question, without any hint of a pre-existing frame or set answer. This question is written onto a large shape in the middle of the whiteboard, to focus discussion. Pupils working in groups can gather their ideas onto the MagNotes, writing them using marker pens which can rub off. It does not matter at this stage if some of the ideas are irrelevant to the question because there is no set structure. Thoughts that might not have fitted into a writing frame are nevertheless included in a collective and visual gathering of the groups' responses to the question.

After pupils have gathered their ideas, the teacher moves them on to sorting and ordering their material. This is where they can move the ideas round in relation to each other to form meaningful patterns. Ideas can be brought into focus and linked together. The effect is as if there were some kind of writing frame, because the pattern is neither random nor structure-less. The pupils interact

Key Question	England 1640-1660: Was the world turned upside down?
Introduction	The question means... In this period these things happened... This essay will address whether these turned England upside down...
Charles I	The main things that happened were: 1 2 3 Did these things turn England upside down? I think... Reasons for / against
Cromwell and the Protectorate	(Repeat as above)
The Restoration	
Conclusion	In these ways England was turned upside down... However, in other ways they didn't... My overall conclusion is...

with each other to produce interesting lay-outs that convey meaning without having to have a set formula. The pupils tend to have a much greater understanding of the theme since they have to address *both content and structure* instead of simply content. They are also well prepared for extended writing on the question they have addressed, as their visual display can be correlated to headings, paragraphs and prose.

When writing frames are used, structure is quite separate from content. In using LVT, structure and

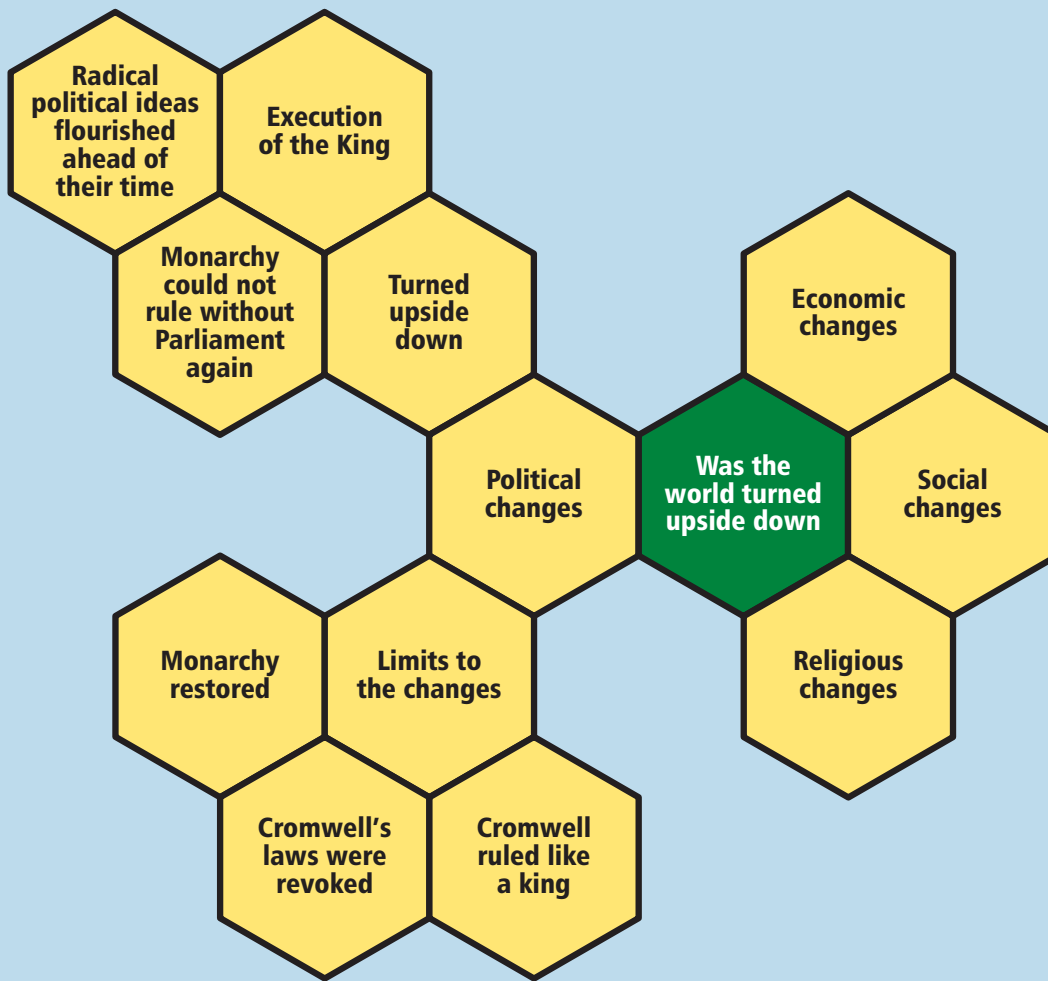
Writing frame for addressing the question: England 1640-1660: Was the world turned upside down?

Drawbacks of writing frames

- Can limit the thinking of some pupils.
- Focuses learners towards set answers.
- Tendency to restrict answers to using a few frames.
- Cannot predict examination answers, leading to pupils writing set answers rather than addressing the question.
- Tend to put off pupils who have visual or other preferred learning styles.
- Can lead to all members of the group producing similar pieces of coursework.
- Can stunt creative expression.
- Following the frame can become the focus of the activity, rather than the learning itself.
- Can lead to pupils selecting information to fit the frame they know, rather than selecting information to answer the question whilst using a frame for guidance.

Structured Writing Case-study from KS3 History

Visit www.teachingexpertise.com to see Franks' account of two lessons covering the same topic, one using writing frames and the other LVT.



LogoVisual structure produced by pupils addressing the question: England 1640-1660: Was the world turned upside down?



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content go hand in hand and pupils can develop their own way of organising the material. This does not mean a way that is idiosyncratic. LVT is applied in small groups involving much interaction and so pupils can check out ideas with each

LogoVisual Tools

MagNotes are write-on, wipe-off shapes that stick magnetically to suitable lightweight whiteboards.

This provides a very flexible medium for supporting thinking processes as many kinds of ideas can be added, edited and moved around in relationship to one another as a kind of mirror on the thinking and understanding that is being developed. The process can be as structured or structure-less as the specific topic and intended outcomes require.

See issue **TEX**, issue 5, Sept 2004 for full introductory article, and visit www.logovisual.com for information on LVT tools.

other and, in particular, show each other what they have in mind with the minimum of words in a visual medium. In some respects, pupils find the LVT approach much easier than using writing frames, even though working on structure and content together is a higher order thinking skill, because they do not have to distort their thinking to fit into the standardised frames. The guidance needed for most pupils is very minimal, simply drawing attention to degrees of importance or credence and the inevitability of many different points of view.

Writing frames, like templates in a computer application, can provide useful prompts as to how one might present information. However, we should be wary of shackling pupils' creativity by using them as a way of structuring thinking. **TEX**

Have your say!

Visit the www.teachingexpertise.com forum to share your views and experiences on how degrees of structure aid and hinder learning.