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WHAT MAKES A GOOD WRITING STIMULUS?
-11 year olds express their views

Martin Johnson

A paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference
Exeter, 12th - 14th September 2002

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Note
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Contact Details
Martin Johnson
Primary Assessment Unit
Research and Evaluation Division
University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
Syndicate Buildings
1 Hills Road
Cambridge
CB1 2EU
Tel: 01223 553843
Fax: 01223 552700
Email: johnson.m@ucles.org.uk

Abstract: *What makes a good writing stimulus - 11 year olds express their views*

At the end of the primary phase, eleven year olds complete a writing test in which they choose a topic from four options. The stimuli that they are asked to work from can range from the provision of a simple title, to the inclusion of context supports. The variety of support given may include visual stimuli, content and structure prompts, purpose and audience references, and thematic differences.

The aim of this study was to investigate children's perceptions of what made a good writing stimulus. In order to unpack the idea of what made a stimulus 'good', the study explored the issue on a number of levels through some key questions:

Which features of layout did the children feel to be important?
Did children prefer more or less defined tasks?
How important was the audience and purpose when writing?
How did differences in ability affect the choice of task?
How did gender differences affect the choice of task?
How did genre differences affect the choice of task?

This paper reports on the responses of 192 eleven year olds who expressed different choices when confronted with a variety of task stimuli. The study was designed to gather children's opinions on mixed genre stimuli, narrative stimuli and persuasive writing stimuli. Subsequently their responses were coded and analysed to investigate the factors that affected their choices and why.

Introduction

The latest report on standards at key stage 2 (children aged 7-11) by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (*QCA*) restates the continued concern about levels of attainment in writing for 11-year-old children (QCA, 2002). This follows in the wake of a QCA press release on the 13th January 2000 which also claimed that 'at 11-years-old the performance of boys and girls in reading [has] improved, [but] overall pupils' writing is less good than reading' (QCA, 2000). Added to this, a recent evaluation report of national test results has also shown that boys' achievement lags behind that of girls to the point where 'girls are ten percentage points ahead of boys in English by the end of KS2 [key stage 2]' (HMI, 2001, p.1).

These statements are increasingly important when set in relation to the recent general improvements in standards in primary school literacy, which have been identified by the Office for Standards in Education (*OFSTED*) (HMI, 2001). The extent of the lag in writing achievement behind that of reading is a concern for policy makers at a national level who have set particular targets for attainment at the end of key stage two. It could be argued that the discrepancy between achievement in writing and reading is an inevitable consequence of the different demands of the two activities.

Frater (2001) highlights many of the reasons why writing is a more difficult activity than reading. He suggests that the requirement to control the symbolic codes and systems of text generation at the simultaneous levels of word, sentence and text sets it apart from the simpler reading skills

needed to respond to ‘black marks on a page’. Several theoretical models (Goswami & Bryant, 1990; Frith, 1985) further reinforce the claim that the acquisition of reading skills leads to the development of writing skills, therefore necessitating a writing lag behind reading attainment.

Concerns about children’s attainment in writing highlight the importance of appraising some of the factors that may affect children’s writing performance. Understanding the effect of a stimulus requires the recognition of factors that affect children as they approach the writing process. Sharples (1999) suggests that good writing relies on an uninterrupted transition from *reflection* to *engagement*. The purpose of the effective stimulus is to reduce the fragmentation of the cycle of *'reflection and engagement'.* The stimulus does this by reducing the *'coherence of constraints'*. Constraints upon an individual's ability to write can be identified as being external and internal.

> *The external constraints include the writing task, the audience, the tools available for writing and the surrounding world of human and physical resources. The internal, mental constraints are of two general types: content (what to write, including the facts and experiences we are able to summon up) and rhetoric (how to write it, including style and structure, to fit the audience and purpose).* (Sharples, 1999, p.41)

Although constraints allow writers to control the multitude of possibilities that thought and language offer, Sharples argues that the writing process may become fragmented when constraints combine and become coherent. The perspective that the performance of children may be affected by stimuli in very individual ways is reinforced by a recent study of children's views of national reading test stimuli. Green, Hamnett & Green (2001) found that a link could be established between children’s interest and their level of motivation.

The aim of this study was to investigate the stimulus features that children felt stimulated their ideas when selecting a task, and those which did not. It aimed to do this through an investigation of 'construct awareness'. 'Construct awareness' relates to the ideas and concepts that children are conscious of when they encounter and engage with a stimulus. The study also explored the interaction of constructs, and the effects that the combination of constructs had on children's preferences.

The idea of a ‘good’ stimulus was explored through a number of key questions:

- Which constructs of a task stimulus did children perceive to be salient?
- Did children prefer more or less defined tasks?
- How important were the audience and purpose?
- How might differences in ability and gender have affected the choice of task?
- How did differences between genres affect children's choices?

It was felt that by gaining an understanding of the salience that children attached to different stimuli features, the findings of this study would be relevant to anyone who devises writing tasks for children. By acknowledging the opinions of children, task designers can help to make sure that the stimuli that they provide appeal to those being asked to engage with the task.

Methodology

192 year 6 children were shown three stimuli which were from different genres (see Appendix 1). The children were asked which one they would choose to do and why, they were also asked about which one was their least favoured and why (see Appendix 2). This study was designed to investigate children's perceptions of task stimuli or 'construct awareness' at three levels.

At the first level, data were collected about the choices which children had made. Teacher assessments for writing were also collected so that issues of children's ability could be explored in relation to their stimuli choices.

At the second stage of the study, children's open responses were coded, and this allowed their reasons for their choices to be clarified and explained further. This allowed the study to identify and group salient features or constructs that influenced children during the decision-making process.

At the third stage, issues identified in the earlier stages will be probed in a qualitative study.

Findings

Choices

Percentage of pupils who chose the stimulus as their favoured option

	All (n=192)	Girls (*n=98*)	Boys (*n=94*)
What was that? (explanatory)	***36***	33	39
A door opens (narrative)	***28***	26	31
Spider supporter (persuasive)	***36***	42	30

The explanation card *(What was that?)* and the persuasive letter *(Spider supporter)* were equally popular overall, whilst the narrative *(A door opens)* was least popular overall. More girls preferred the persuasive letter. More boys than girls preferred the narrative and explanatory writing stimuli, with most boys liking the explanation card *(What was that?)*.

What children liked and disliked about the explanatory task (What was that?)

Positive and negative features mentioned by the children are listed below in descending order of frequency:

Positive *(n=69)*	**Negative** *(n=59)*
▫ Activity theme (48)	▫ Activity theme (37)
▫ Perceived activity easy (30)	▫ Perceived activity difficult (17)
▫ Activity text type (16)	▫ Activity text type (13)
▫ Activity purpose (12)	▫ Activity purpose (6)
▫ Activity allowing use of prior knowledge (9)	▫ Activity long (3)
▫ Activity long (8)	▫ Stimulus providing options (3)
▫ Stimulus long (5)	▫ Stimulus long (2)
▫ Stimulus providing options (5)	▫ Activity allowing prior knowledge (1)

For those who commented on this stimulus the theme was the most important feature. Most children expected it to be an easier task than the other tasks. The text type had both positive and negative effects. Of the minority of children who mentioned the facility to use prior knowledge, most of them liked it. There is evidence to suggest that the purpose of the task was liked overall. The length of the activity and stimulus were less important.

What children liked and disliked about the narrative task (A door opens)

Positive and negative features mentioned by the children are listed below in descending order of frequency:

Positive *(n=54)*	**Negative** *(n=76)*
▫ Activity theme (41)	▫ Activity text type (38)
▫ Activity text type (31)	▫ Perceived activity difficult (36)
▫ Activity allows freedom to write own ideas (16)	▫ Activity theme (23)
▫ Perceived activity easy (7)	▫ Stimulus has minimal detail (20)
▫ Stimulus has minimal detail (2)	▫ Activity long (13)
▫ Activity long (1)	▫ Activity allows freedom to write own ideas (1)
▫ Activity short (1)	

For those who commented on this stimulus the theme was the most important feature, and there were more positive than negative comments about it overall. The text type had roughly equal positive and negative effects. The task was perceived as being difficult and this was a negative effect.

Some children liked the facility to 'think freely' without being restricted by the stimulus, this was a positive effect. The short stimulus that provided little support and the long activity both had a negative effect. There was evidence to suggest that the Level 4 writers liked the narrative option more (41%) than the Level 3 writers did (23%) (see Appendix 3, table 1).

What children liked and disliked about the persuasive task (Spider supporter)

Positive and negative features mentioned by the children are listed below in descending order of frequency:

Positive *(n=69)*	**Negative** *(n=57)*
▫ Activity text type (42)	▫ Activity theme (33)
▫ Activity theme (33)	▫ Activity text type (24)
▫ Perceived activity easy (21)	▫ Perceived activity difficult (15)
▫ Stimulus long (19)	▫ Activity purpose (14)
▫ Activity purpose (16)	▫ Stimulus long (3)
▫ Activity short (7)	▫ Activity long (1)

For those who commented on this stimulus, the text type was the most important positive feature and there were more positive than negative comments about it overall. The theme had equal positive and negative effects. Task demand was evenly split between those who felt that the activity would be easy and those who felt that it would be difficult. Purpose had an even positive/negative effect. The long stimulus with greater support had a positive effect. The short activity also had a positive effect.

Genre comparisons

The narrative option was the least popular overall. This appears to have been related to the theme, the lack of support that the stimulus offered, or perceptions of difficulty. The narrative option was especially unpopular with girls.

Girls liked the persuasive stimulus more than the boys. There is evidence to suggest that this was because of the inclusion of the letter, since more girls liked the letter writing ($^{29}/_{41}$) than boys

($^{13}/_{28}$). The evidence also suggests that girls liked the greater level of support contained within the stimulus, despite the high reading demand (see Appendix 3, table 9). Overall, more girls felt the task to be easier than boys did, although more boys liked the spider topic ($^{17}/_{28}$) than girls ($^{16}/_{41}$).

Salient features listed in descending order of frequency

Explanatory	Narrative	Persuasive
Theme Demand Text type	Text type Theme Demand	Theme Text type Demand
Purpose Activity length Prior knowledge Stimulus length Stimulus options	Stimulus length Freedom of thought Activity length	Purpose Stimulus length Activity length

The three most important features mentioned in each of the different stimuli were theme, perceived task demand and text type. The relative importance of each varied by genre. Length of the stimulus and activity were also mentioned in all three genres. Children more often preferred longer stimuli and shorter activities than vice versa. Purpose was a significant feature in the non-narrative tasks, but not for the narrative. Freedom was an important feature for a minority of children in the narrative.

Conclusion

Theme, genre and difficulty were the most significant features that affected children's choices. Other features counterbalanced the effects of these features in a variety of ways.

Traditionally, narrative has been the most commonly chosen form of writing in key stage 2 writing tests. The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) has led to a greater exposure of younger children to a wider variety of genres, and this might be reflected in the choices of the children in this study. Furthermore, story writing means writing more and this deters some children who choose tasks that they think are shorter and which they may perceive as being easier.

This raises an interesting point about children's perceptions of 'difficulty'. Although 'writing more' for a task may equate to it 'being harder', it appears that this perception may be influenced by other factors. For example, although the narrative was considered by many children to be difficult, the 'theme' still had an effect, with the boys liking the 'mystery/adventure' theme.

Purpose is important to children and this was the case in the non-narrative stimuli. It was not mentioned in the narrative comments, and this was one of the features that made the task less

popular. The data appears to signal that for children the 'purpose' of writing stories is to be creative. This would reinforce the observation by Littlefair (1992) that children in the early years of education enjoy the emotional response and imaginative experience that early exposure to narrative forms involves.

There may be an argument here that the NLS has managed to promote the purpose of non-narrative genres very successfully, but has done so at the expense of narrative writing. This argument may be reinforced by the fears of primary practitioners that extended narrative writing has tended to be overlooked because it fails to sit comfortably within the classic 'literacy hour' time frame. The relative unpopularity of the narrative option may be a result of this lack of exposure to extended story writing, because of a preference for more compact genres. It may also be the result of children becoming more aware of both their own writing strengths and the expectations implicit in different writing genres.

Since the introduction of the national writing tests there has been a suspicion that some teachers are steering children towards forms of writing in which they feel that the children will be more successful. Narratives are considered by many to be difficult to do well, and perhaps this awareness of relative difficulty is permeating the thoughts of children and influencing their choices.

Implications

The comments made by the children were perceptive and wide-ranging. They showed that the children were aware of the features of the stimuli, and that they weighed up those features as they made their choices. They not only commented on their preference for a given theme, but also were able to consider more complex issues such as support, purpose and scope for freedom.

The opinions of the children who are expected to engage with the tasks are a rich source of information for those who attempt to develop writing tasks which will facilitate children's writing. If they are interested and engaged in the stimulus, they are likely to be more motivated and more able to produce better writing.

In national tests children have become used to having support in the stimuli and this affects their choices. However, it is not simply a case that more support means easier tasks. Some children in the study preferred less support because it gave them greater freedom to be creative and to develop their ideas. These were mainly more able children. Also, more support means more

reading, and that can be a negative feature for some children. A balance is needed between 'enough' support, and not too much.

The findings of this study suggest the need for further investigation into children's perceptions of difficulty. It appears that children may perceive the difficulty of a task in relation to a number of factors. These include:

- the amount of writing expected in the task - does less mean easier?
- the amount of 'creative thinking' required to fill the gaps left by minimal stimuli.
- the amount of 'creative thinking' required as a consequence of a specific 'theme'.
- awareness of the demands of the task and their confidence in their own ability.
- whether in certain types of writing it is easier to 'do well'.

In summary, it appears that some concrete statements regarding stimuli may be made, such as children generally favoured a combination of long stimulus/short activity as opposed to short stimulus/long activity. On the other hand, it also appears that for children many of the stimuli features that were to be explored by this study, such as the role of illustration and textual layout, may be considered 'cosmetic' in relation to larger issues. It appears that the 'whole language' issues of what you write about (theme), and how (text type), are still key features for children as they choose whether to engage or not with the writing process.

The findings of this study, and subsequent planned qualitative research into perceptions of difficulty, have important implications for people designing stimuli for assessment purposes. It is clear that certain features and combinations of features affect children's perceptions of difficulty, and these affect children in different ways. If assessment of children's writing is to be 'fair' then it is important to recognise the range of effects that different features have on different children.

These points are even more pertinent when recently announced changes to key stage 2 national writing tests are taken into account. A major revision to the national tests will see children being asked to produce two pieces of writing without any element of choice (*TES PRIMARY* 2002). This revision will reduce children's ability to indulge their preferences, and this may then lead to a reduction in motivation and therefore attainment in the task. By stipulating specific tasks to be completed, test designers need to be very sure that they have taken into account the effects that particular features and combinations of features will have on children.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1

Explanatory stimulus

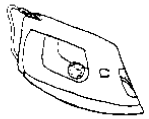
1. What was that?

It is 200 years in the future, and a museum is planning an exhibition to show what life was like in the year 2002.

There will be a display of photographs of everyday objects from the year 2002, **each object will need a short explanation card to say what it was**.

Look at the pictures of the objects below.

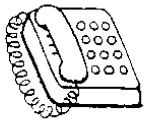
Choose **two** objects.



iron

television

clock



telephone

washing machine

kettle

Write an explanation card to go with the objects you choose:

- write about what the object is and what it is used for;
- what it looks like;
- how it works;
- why it is useful.

Narrative stimulus

2. A door opens

"What's in the room I have never entered?

What's behind the door I have never opened?"

Write a short story about what happens when you open the door.

The story will be read aloud to your class, so make it as interesting and exciting as possible.

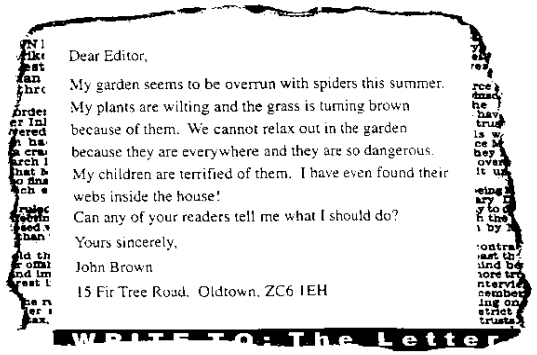
Persuasive stimulus

3. Spider supporter

Here are some facts about spiders:

- British spiders cannot seriously harm you;
- spiders help to rid houses of insects;
- they help to keep gardens free of insects that might damage plants;
- a spider knows how to spin its web, without learning how to do it;
- even large spiders are delicate and are easily injured.

A letter appears in a local newspaper:



Dear Editor,

My garden seems to be overrun with spiders this summer. My plants are wilting and the grass is turning brown because of them. We cannot relax out in the garden because they are everywhere and they are so dangerous. My children are terrified of them. I have even found their webs inside the house!

Can any of your readers tell me what I should do?

Yours sincerely,

John Brown

15 Fir Tree Road. Oldtown. ZC6 1EH

Use the spider facts to write a letter directly to **Mr Brown**. The purpose of your letter is to **persuade** him why he is wrong about spiders.

Appendix 2

Response sheet

Writing choices 1

Name: **B / G**

- **Write as much as you can for each section**
- **Remember to look back at your writing choices booklet each time**

Which writing activity do you choose?

Tick the title you would choose.

1. What was that? ☐
2. A door opens ☐
3. Spider supporter ☐

Give reasons for your choice: (look back at your writing choices booklet)

Which writing activity would you <u>least</u> like to do?

1. What was that? ☐
2. A door opens ☐
3. Spider supporter ☐

Give reasons for your choice: (look back at your writing choices booklet)

Finish this page before you turn over

Think about:

- illustrations
- how clear the instructions are
- layout/spacing
- bullet points
- bold type

Now try to give more reasons for your favourite choice: (look back at your writing choices booklet).

Try to give more reasons for your <u>least</u> favourite choice: (look back at your writing choices booklet).

Appendix 3: *tables*

Table 1: *Overall choices*

Percentage of pupils who chose the stimulus as their favoured option

	All (n=192)	Girls (*n=98*)	Boys (*n=94*)	***Level 3 (n=135)***	***Level 4 (n=50)***
What was that?	***36***	33	39	***39***	***31***
A door opens	***28***	26	31	***23***	***41***
Spider supporter	***36***	42	30	***38***	***28***

Table 2: *Salient features of 'What was that?'*

Construct	*Children n=128*	*Girls n=66*	*Boys n=62*
Activity content	85	45	40
Perceived activity demand	52	25	27
Activity easy	*32*	*14*	*18*
Activity difficult	*20*	*11*	*9*
Activity text type	29	16	13
Activity purpose	18	8	10
Activity length	12	6	6
Activity long	*11*	*5*	*6*
Activity short	*1*	*1*	*0*
Activity prior knowledge	10	2	8
Stimulus length	8	7	1
Stimulus long/detailed	*6*	*5*	*1*
Stimulus minimal detail	*2*	*2*	*0*
Stimulus options	8	4	4

Table 3: *Positive constructs for 'What was that?'*

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a positive sense (%) n=69*
Activity content	70
Perceived activity demand	48
Activity easy	*44*
Activity difficult	*4*
Activity text type	23
Activity purpose	17
Activity prior knowledge	13
Activity length	12
Activity long	*12*
Activity short	*0*
Stimulus length	7
Stimulus long/detailed	*7*
Stimulus minimal detail	*0*
Stimulus options	7

Table 4: *Negative constructs for 'What was that?'*

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a negative sense (%) n=59*
Activity content	63
Perceived activity demand	32
Activity easy	*3*
Activity difficult	*29*
Activity text type	22
Activity purpose	10
Activity length	7
Activity long	*5*
Activity short	*2*
Stimulus length	5
Stimulus long/detailed	*3*
Stimulus minimal detail	*2*
Stimulus options	5
Activity prior knowledge	2

Table 5: ***Salient features of 'A door opens'***

Construct	*Children n=130*	*Girls n=65*	*Boys n=65*
Activity text type	69	37	32
Activity content	64	28	36
Perceived activity demand	43	23	20
Activity easy	7	4	3
Activity difficult	36	19	17
Stimulus length	23	12	11
Stimulus long/detailed	*2*	*1*	*1*
Stimulus minimal detail	*21*	*11*	*10*
Activity freedom of thought	17	10	7
Activity length	15	8	7
Activity long	*14*	*7*	*7*
Activity short	*1*	*1*	*0*

Table 6: ***Positive constructs for 'A door opens'***

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a positive sense (%) n=54*
Activity content	76
Activity text type	57
Activity freedom of thought	30
Perceived activity demand	13
Activity easy	13
Activity difficult	0
Stimulus length	4
Stimulus long/detailed	*0*
Stimulus minimal detail	*4*
Activity length	4
Activity long	*2*
Activity short	*2*

Table 7: ***Negative constructs for 'A door opens'***

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a negative sense (%) n=76*
Activity text type	50
Perceived activity demand	47
Activity easy	*0*
Activity difficult	*47*
Activity content	30
Stimulus length	28
Stimulus long/detailed	*2*
Stimulus minimal detail	*26*
Activity length	17
Activity long	*17*
Activity short	*0*
Activity freedom of thought	2

Table 8: ***Salient positive features of 'A door opens' by gender***

Construct	*Children n=54*	*Girls n=25*	*Boys n=29*
Activity content	41	17	24
Activity text type	31	15	16
Activity freedom of thought	16	9	7
Perceived activity demand	7	4	3
Activity easy	*7*	*4*	*3*
Activity difficult	*0*	*0*	*0*
Stimulus length	2	1	1
Stimulus long/detailed	*0*	*0*	*0*
Stimulus minimal detail	*2*	*1*	*1*
Activity length	2	1	1
Activity long	*1*	*0*	*1*
Activity short	*1*	*1*	*0*

Table 9: ***Salient features of 'Spider supporter'***

Construct	*Children n=126*	*Girls n=65*	*Boys n=61*
Activity content	66	33	33
Activity text type	66	36	30
Perceived activity demand	38	21	17
Activity easy	*23*	*16*	*7*
Activity difficult	*15*	*5*	*10*
Activity purpose	30	13	17
Stimulus length	22	15	7
Stimulus long/detailed	*22*	*15*	*7*
Stimulus minimal detail	*0*	*0*	*0*
Activity length	8	6	2
Activity long	*1*	*0*	*1*
Activity short	*7*	*6*	*1*

Table 10: ***Positive constructs for 'Spider supporter'***

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a positive sense (%) n=69*
Activity text type	61
Activity content	48
Perceived activity demand	30
Activity easy	*30*
Activity difficult	*0*
Stimulus length	28
Stimulus long/detailed	*28*
Stimulus minimal detail	*0*
Activity purpose	23
Activity length	10
Activity long	*0*
Activity short	*10*

Table 11: ***Negative constructs for 'Spider supporter'***

Construct	*Children who used the construct in a negative sense (%) n=57*
Activity content	58
Activity text type	42
Perceived activity demand	30
Activity easy	*4*
Activity difficult	*26*
Activity purpose	25
Stimulus length	5
Stimulus long/detailed	*5*
Stimulus minimal detail	*0*
Activity length	2
Activity long	*2*
Activity short	*0*