



How do you get kids to write?

By Andy Briggs

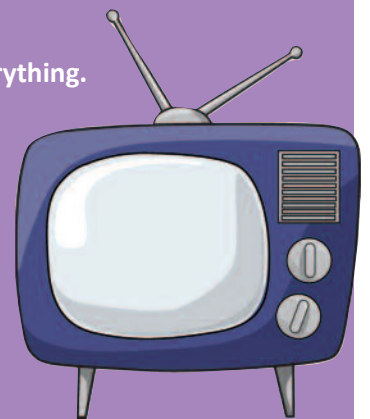
We all know getting children to read can be difficult, but getting them to write? Forget it. When I do author visits I always ask for a show of hands from the students who enjoy reading compared to those who enjoy writing. On average you will be lucky to get twenty per cent of hands raised in answer to the reading question and about a half again for writing. So, over the years, I developed a strategy to encourage kids to think about writing in a different way.

First of all, I tell them about a future. A future when all the writers they know have retired and we all live in the same author OAP home. "Who is going to write then?" I ask. Then I point to the kids and tell them that it will be their duty to entertain me. A fit of giggles and the rolling of eyes usually follow this. That is because they really don't understand what it is writers actually do. I mean, do you? Have you really thought about it?

I'm in a lucky position. I write books, comics, TV shows and movies. So I tell the kids how I can't draw, but I can describe the pictures; write dialogue and sound effects, and then talented artists can come along and draw their interpretation of what I have written, thus creating a wonderful comic book.

Then I point out that everything on TV is written. Yes, everything. From the scripts of EastEnders, to the newsreaders' teleprompters on Sky News. From Teletubbies through to Big Brother - yes, it is. It's what we in the industry call "scripted reality".

Who writes Davina McCall's scripts? Who tells the editors how to string the housemate's rants together in the most salacious way? What about Gary Lineker's team of researchers who write all the info he needs for each match? Who writes the voiceovers for those documentaries you watch? And who writes all those commercials - which are really just short films.



Of course, by now the students know writers write the movies they watch. Even the silent ones. So I quickly ask for a show of hands: "Who likes listening to songs?" - and every hand in the room shoots up. So I have to tell them that song lyrics are written, they are stories and statements, just like poems. Every song they listen to has a writer (and not necessarily a musician) behind it. Do you really think Robbie Williams wrote his hit song, *Angels*? No, it was Guy Chambers.



How do you get kids to write?



So, then I hit them with my secret weapon: *"Who likes playing computer games?"*

Yes, every game is written - be it the instruction manual for *Tetris*, or the story of the game you play when you turn on *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*. After all, the games themselves are interactive stories, so writers need to create them long before computer whizzes code them and artists create the 3D worlds. Incidentally, the animated sections between the games are written exactly like a writer would script an episode of *EastEnders*...

So, when I am an OAP - if nobody writes books, TV shows, movies, games, songs, poems or good old fashioned journalism then I will be staring at a blank wall. More importantly, those kids in my audience, when they get to be my age now, will be bored beyond belief. Never mind entertaining me, they have to entertain themselves.

As you can see, my belief is that to engage a child in reading, and specifically writing, you have to convince them that it's cool. Show them that writing influences everything they enjoy. Of course, this philosophy can be easily torpedoed by the one kid who puts up their hand and gloomily states: *"I never have any ideas!"*

Nothing makes my blood boil so much. It's utter nonsense.

There is a jolly aphorism: *"Write what you know."*

Please, never tell a child this or they will smartly reply that they don't know nuthin'. When I used to hear that dreadful phrase I automatically started wondering what it was I really knew. Answer: very little.

It should be: *"Write what you enjoy."* This is what I tell my audience of now-keen future writers: Have they ever been told by their teacher to write a story - but have been unable to think of anything? Yes, they all cry. So I welcome them to the author's worst nightmare: writer's block.

Then I tell them how to cure it.



Write what you enjoy.

Your teacher has told you to write a story about a king. The first thing you do is... ignore it. Instead, think about something you did at the weekend and enjoyed.

Say you were playing *Call of Duty* on the Xbox... (By now teachers in the room are going pale and hoping somebody will drag me off stage). Why not write a story set in World War 2? After all, you were there at the weekend. You could describe the bombed out French streets, the battle-scarred tanks, and the dreadful boom of the guns far better than the history teacher could. You lived it, albeit virtually. So, why not put your king in the war?

So we have a setting. What about the story? Well, maybe on Sunday you watched a cool bank robbery movie: *Ocean's 11* or something similar. How about your king is robbing a bank? After all, you know how to rob a bank you just watched it happen! Now combine the two ideas and make it your own story. Perhaps the king is robbing a bank during the war to steal back his crown and save his country?

Or maybe you played football? So, does your king have to play the ultimate soccer game to save his throne - or be beheaded if he doesn't?

By invoking what the student enjoys doing makes the task of writing a story more enjoyable. We're not interested in originality, we're interested in firing up their imaginations, and once the writing bug has bitten them a whole world of entertainment awaits...