Seven Tips for Better Demand Writing

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Demand (or standardized) writing is the type of writing students are required to do (usually) under test conditions – a demand is placed upon them to come up with a piece of writing within a specified, usually short, period of time. The topics are usually constrained by a question or stimulus material. The NAPLAN writing task for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 is an example of such a test. However, such writing is a part of the New South Wales HSC and the Queensland Core Skills Test, to name just two examples.

Each year, sample, exemplar writing from these tests is made public. Analysis of these samples reveals some patterns in what makes a difference to achieving a high grade and tips for helping students is included below. It should be noted that this advice should always be read in conjunction with the official advice and samples published by the various educational authorities.

**Tip One: Teach more than just standard, generic recipes.**
There are a number of popular (and useful) ‘recipes’ around for teaching various genres, for example:
- **Narrative**: orientation, complication, series of events, resolution, coda
- **Report**: General classification, details
- **Argument**: Thesis, preview of arguments, arguments in detail, conclusion.

Research shows that students with an understanding of these ‘recipes’ have a better chance of receiving a passing grade on demand writing tasks. However, in order to receive higher grades, students need to go beyond the recipe and demonstrate that they can use the basic structure in innovative ways to achieve particular purposes and effects with particular audiences. So, when teaching the various genres, be sure to provide a range of models to students – some that show the ‘basic’ way to structure their writing, and others that show how this basic structure can be manipulated and varied.

**Tip Two: Encourage students to draw on ‘exotic’ knowledge.**
Students are often told to write about what they know. Unfortunately, this can be bad advice for demand writing tasks where markers usually expect an insight into the best that students know and can do. It is often better to write about something they know about – but not drawing on common,
everyday experiences from the students’ own lives. They need, instead, to include ‘exotic’ knowledge – knowledge from outside their direct experience – into the piece of writing.

For example, they might write about a trip to the beach, but take the opportunity in the story to show their knowledge of marine biology by describing some of the sea life the characters encounters. Or, they might write the story of momentous day in the life of a teenager, but it could be a teenager living in ancient China. This ‘exotic’ knowledge is the sort of stuff they are learning in content subject areas (e.g. science and history), as well as knowledge and understanding that is drawn from outside interests and hobbies.

**Tip Three: Older students need to avoid first person.**

There is clear evidence that older students receiving high grades avoid first person, writing in third person instead. By avoiding first person, it is easier, under the pressure of a test situation, to also avoid teen slang and colloquial language which is not valued in demand writing tasks. Even younger students would be advised to use first person with caution – for example, by taking on the role of a child living in another time and place (thus, also demonstrating some of that all important ‘exotic’ knowledge), or the role of a mature adult reflecting back on their younger years. In the latter case, students can use a little teen slang in dialogue, but are more likely to avoid it in the narration and descriptions.

**Tip Four: Students need to learn how to integrate implicit evaluations into their writing.**

Written texts are full of evaluations, for example a review might describe a novel as an ‘outstanding new entry into the crime genre’ or a city might be described as ‘very windy’. The highlighted words carry the main evaluations. Moreover, these evaluations are quite explicit – the reader is told overtly that the novel is ‘outstanding’ and that the city experiences strong winds. In demand writing tasks, students who do well are able to select very specific adjectives, nouns and verbs (in particular) that carry the meaning implicitly. So, for example, instead of ‘very beautiful’, a student might write ‘ravishing’; instead of ‘walked with confidence’, the student might write ‘strode’; instead of ‘the wind blew the snowflakes gently on to the window sill’ a student might write ‘the wind lofted the snowflakes on to the window sill”; instead of ‘a really ugly old woman’, the student might write ‘the hag’.

**Tip Five: Writing ‘in depth’ can be achieved through elaborating noun groups.**

Often less competent students write in very simple language, e.g. “We went to the park. At the park, we went on the swings. It was fun.” While that sort of pared down language might have won a Nobel Award for Literature for Ernest Hemingway, it is less likely to impress markers of demand writing tasks. One way to add depth to writing is to make effective use of the potential contained within noun groups. Noun groups are a group of words associated with a particular thing, e.g. the park, seven swans on the lake, tasty choc-chip ice-cream that was melting in the sun. These noun groups are made of six possible parts:

- pointer word (answers which one?)
- number adjective (answers how many?)
- quality adjective (answers what quality?)
type adjective (answers what type?)
noun/thing (answers what's this group of words about?)
post-modifier (answers what else do we know about the thing?)

With immersion in examples, modelling and practice, students can be taught how and when to use long noun groups in order to pack in lots of information and achieve particular effects, e.g. “Both John and I went to the newly mowed, council Park down by the river. At the park, we went on the old-style chain swings that threatened to throw off the unwary child. It was fun” (compare this to the original at the start of this section).

**Tip Six: Use different sentence types and structures to make a difference.**

As well as an appropriate mix of short and long sentences, students also need to deploy an appropriate mix of sentence types and structures:
- simple sentence (a group of words containing one verb or verb group), e.g. The pigs build a house.
- compound sentence (two – or more – simple sentences joined by and, or, but), e.g. The pigs built a house and lived in it for many years.
- complex sentence (a sentence containing a major and at least one minor, embedded clause), e.g. The pigs whose parents had been eaten by a vicious wolf built a house.

As well as learning how to create each of these sentence types, students need some guidance in when to use them effectively and appropriately. For example, in a story, short sentences can be used to speed the action along, and long, complex sentences can be used to slow the action down. However, too many long, complex sentences can make a piece of writing difficult to read and really slow the reader down. Similarly, too many simple sentences can make a piece of writing sound simplistic and unsophisticated.

**Tip Seven: Judicious experimentation with language should be encouraged.**

Test time is not the place to write something so avant-garde that there is the possibility of confusing or offending the marker. However, demand writing tasks are the place for good students to demonstrate their capabilities with language and some judicious, in-context deployment of non-standard language features may be appropriate (depending on the task and genre). For example, sentence fragments can be use effectively to isolate and/or highlight specific information: “A figure emerged out of the mist, walking towards me. As the figure grew more distinct, I gasped in shocked recognition. My brother! My older brother who had been missing these past ten years!” Better students, therefore, need to be equipped with a ‘bag of (language) tricks’ that they can dip into as appropriate – ‘a bag of (language) tricks’ that has been extensively modelled and practised. On the other hand, weaker students need to be encouraged to stick with standard, accurate uses of English.

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