Several years ago, when I was working at ELA in Úbeda, we noticed that our students were consistently getting low scores in their writing papers, and some were failing the whole thing because of it. In one fateful staff meeting it was decided that we would focus on teaching writing and developing strategies for it. This turned into a long and winding five year action research project. The big innovation was a set of guides for learners to use to create a great piece of writing every time.

Armed with those guides, I started investigating smaller ways of developing writing skills. I’m from a family of writers, and it always troubled me a little that I sent writing home; as their teacher I’d always see the results of their choices, but never really have the opportunity to help the next choices be better ones. I presented the first version of this workshop in 2017 and 18 focused squarely on B2 and C1 levels.

A lot has changed since then! Cambridge brought out a long-overdue overhaul of B1 in January 2020, and then the face of ELT as we know it changed with Covid-19. I knew that the workshop was still relevant, but it needed an overhaul. The core approach to writing has not changed, but certain aspects have been tweaked and improved. There’s a whole new section in the second half exploring practical ways to teach writing skills, which work in face to face, online, or hybrid classrooms.

Ben Crompton, March 2021
Communication belongs at the heart of every lesson we teach.

Usually, we think of communication as speaking. This might explain why teachers are so often reluctant to focus on writing in class, for fear of spending a large chunk of time writing in silence. When we add exam preparation to the mix, this means that there are all those additional exam techniques to be learnt whilst teaching communicatively. As teachers we have some decisions to make. What aspects of the exam are most challenging for our learners? What parts can they get a good mark in? Which part do I as the teacher have most control over?

I’ve reached the conclusion that with careful and effective teaching, writing fits the brief. My experience shows that it’s the part that I can give students the most confidence with. Once we know what our students have to write in the exam (B1s have to write a letter, and will probably choose the article in part two), we can think about typical features of that text and the type of person who would read them. All of this leads to a formula for teaching exam writing which can all but guarantee success in the exam. Many of my students have passed their B1s and B2s (and C1s and C2s) because of the quality of their writing.

In the 2019/20 course I was given two groups of young teenagers studying for the B1 exam. Although there was a possibility that some students might take the exam that year, it was expected that most would need two years to reach the required level. I was determined to challenge this and get as many of them as possible ready for the exam in one year.

Armed with my toolkit, I set students a story writing task. We did it in class so they could ask for support when needed, and I encouraged them to collaborate where necessary (although most chose not to). I told them that this writing would become a benchmark for us to see what writing was like and what their strengths and weaknesses were.

I collected the writing at the end of class for me to review and give them some individual comments, although I restricted feedback to ways of improving the story rather than addressing language mistakes. Behind the scenes I was using these writing tasks to figure out their weaknesses as writers. There are a number of things I could focus on, including teaching varied narrative tenses (excellent points for a story) and more adjectives and adverbs to make the writing interesting.
If my aim is to teach students to be better writers, then I will probably put less emphasis on the language issues. This might sound counterproductive, but let me explain. My students will learn about narrative tenses and adverbials over time (9 months, in fact). Our coursebooks are very good at laying out all the B1 language our students need to pass, and we’re generally rather good at teaching it and getting our students to use it! When I teach students how to write, I want to train them to always think about the target reader. Writing is another form of communication, but unlike speaking it doesn’t let us see the reader’s reactions. I want my students to always try to answer three questions when they’re writing:

1. Who is the target reader?
2. What do they expect from the writing?
3. How can we organise our ideas to meet those expectations?

By focusing on these areas, I can help my students become better writers in the exam, and in the contexts where they might actually write themselves. It can be easy to dismiss exam writing tasks as archaic. Nobody writes that way any more.

Just last week I wrote an email; the

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### Preliminary part one task is communicative and reflects a text type that students may well use in their own contexts. What about articles and stories?

If we take longform texts out of the equation, writing is an essential communicative skill in 2021. Between WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, and gaming, microwriting is ubiquitous with the role of language today.

When you leave a comment on someone’s photo or meme on Instagram, a key consideration is who you’re writing for and what you want to achieve. This means we can make an important connection between the writing and the social domains where our students interact. If we view writing as a social process, we need to be able to recognise various features of the text we are writing and the context where it is going to be read.

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### All this is well and good, but how does it help our students get better marks in their tests and exams? On the B1 assessment scale of writing, a band 5 for communicative achievement requires candidates to **hold the target reader’s attention.** To score any points for content, a candidate needs to **inform the target reader.** The social context of the text is obviously important, but I think very often our teaching doesn’t really explore it. If we can start to address these issues when we teach writing, we stand a better chance at helping our students become better writers and better communicators, as well as better exam-takers.

Accommodation theory suggests that we change certain aspects of our language to fit with the person we are speaking with. We might signal closeness with informality and accent or show that the listener is socially distant with a clearer pronunciation or certain language choices. So the way that you speak to each of these people (and the topic of conversation) will be vastly different.

### Writing is just the same, only that the communication happens asynchronously. That means that as writers we have to make judgements about who the reader will be, and keep them in mind when we’re writing. It’s something the writer of this piece in EL Gazette clearly didn’t do in the introduction to his article. After enticing the reader in with a catchy rhetorical question, he promptly answered the question with the opposite to what the reader was expecting.

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### Knowledge of the **TARGET READER**

- Understand the purpose of the text you’re writing
- Know how to use typical features of the text (genre)
- Recognise the relationship between the text and its reader

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### Why not teach in Poland?

It can be tough earning a living as an English teacher in Poland. Even being a native speaker there doesn’t necessarily confer an advantage over locally recruited teachers in terms of hourly rates.
Explore how well your students can engage the reader with this guided writing activity.

Think about a place that you love to visit. Copy and complete this sentence:

One of my favourite spots to visit has to be...

In the next sentence, explain why you love to visit this place.

Write a third sentence to compare another place to the first one.

That third sentence is where we risk losing the target reader. Compare two examples of my paragraph about a special five-cornered castle near where I live.

One of my favourite spots to visit has to El Castillo de las Cinco Esquinas in Cazorla. Sitting beside the ancient walls, you have unrivalled views across millions of olive trees. El Castillo de Santa Catalina in Jaén also boasts incredible views, but even these cannot rival those of Cinco Esquinas.

The second paragraph sounds better. It's all because of the way the final sentence begins. The topic of the paragraph is a castle in Cazorla, and the second sentence gives us details about some amazing views. We expect the third sentence to connect to this idea, but in the first sentence it introduces something new instead. This means that as a reader we have to work a little harder to understand what the writer means to say. The relationship between the writer and the reader breaks down a little. The order of information in a sentence is clearly important. In assessed writing, target reader is very much a content

Good writing makes it easy for the reader to follow our ideas.
The theory behind this is called the known-new contract (Columb 1990, Carnegie Mellon Global Writing Centre). According to this, there are two types of information in a sentence: the topic and the stress. The topic is information that the reader already knows about. It’s something that has been mentioned before or that is easily understood from the context.

The topic comes at the beginning of a sentence. The stress is the new information that comes at the end of the sentences. Without knowing the fancy terminology, this is what readers (or listeners, for that matter) expect in a text. When the contract is broken, the reader has to work a little harder to figure out how the sentence relates to the topic of the paragraph.

Fixing this is a simple matter of changing the order of information in the sentence to follow this pattern. We can test this out with a minimal pair activity such as the one about the marvellous Dark Hedges in Northern Ireland. Sentence B is the answer. It follows the expected order of information from known to new which the reader expects. You can do this with your students, and when you ask them why B is the correct answer they normally reply with something like well, it sounds right teacher. And that’s the perfect answer because it shows that they’re aware of what sounds good and bad in writing, and it shows they are starting to think about what the reader would expect to see.

The Known-New Contract helps us guide the target reader through our ideas in writing.

Which sentence fits best?
Can you decide which is the correct second sentence, and why?

If you’ve been to County Antrim in Northern Ireland, you might have been lucky enough to visit the uniquely beautiful Dark Hedges.

A: Game of Thrones filmed some scenes there and then this mysterious row of trees became world-famous.

B: This mysterious row of trees became world-famous after Game of Thrones filmed some scenes there.

Correct answer: B

In the favourite place guided writing activity, students very often lose the focus of the target reader when they start to introduce new ideas. This is easy to spot in their writing, and it often comes from a lack of planning (something many students are loathed to do).

A good rule of thumb is that each paragraph needs to have a single unifying theme. Once we want to talk about a different theme, then it’s time to introduce a new paragraph.
If the reader expects each paragraph to have a single, unifying theme, then we need to teach our students about a key part of organisation in writing - topic sentences. Although these are an important feature of writing (and something that L1 English speakers usually learn when they are in primary school), L2 syllabuses often leave them until much later.

We can view organisation in writing according to three distinct levels.

Level One
Linking words & sequencers

Level Two
Cohesive devices

Level Three
Organisational patterns

Each level shows what Cambridge expects students can do in terms of organisation. The focus of B1 is organisation within and between sentences. B2 sees a shift to organisation across a series of sentences, whilst C1 adopts a whole-text approach. These organisational patterns include things like topic sentences, which I would argue are a key feature of organisation in any level of writing. They aren’t really difficult to teach, and with some practice can become a central feature of B1 level writing.

A topic sentence is a sentence which helps the reader identify the theme of a given paragraph. They are usually the first sentence in the paragraph, and act as introductions to the information that comes next.

Topic sentences can be easy to get right, but they do require students to take a few minutes to plan their writing. For a B1 Part 2 article question, for example, the plan could consist of three topic sentences (one for each of the questions from the instructions).

A hook
An interesting fact or a rhetorical question to hook the reader

Why not teach in Poland?

A teaser
An action statement that makes the reader curious to find out more.

Jennifer Lopez has stunned fans with a surprise wedding photo

Three types of topic sentence

A plan
A list of the different topics to be discussed in the paragraph.

“In my free time, I like watching films, doing sports, and reading

A hook
An interesting fact or a rhetorical question to hook the reader

Why not teach in Poland?

A teaser
An action statement that makes the reader curious to find out more.

Jennifer Lopez has stunned fans with a surprise wedding photo

What type are these topic sentences? Justify your answers.

1. If you have plenty of money, you can spend at the cinema, in a restaurant, or on a game.
2. Money can’t bring us happiness, but it can bring us little moments of joy.
3. Celebrities often long for a private life.
4. What about people that prefer to save money?
5. Being famous makes your life both easier and harder.
6. Only once in my life have I felt really scared.

Suggested answers:
1 - plan, 2 - hook, 3 - teaser (an agent as subject + verb phrase), 4 - hook, 5 - plan, 6 - teaser
Jaime’s writing: a case study

1: A first sentence question
We can expect Jaime to get a good mark for content - all of his story is related to the first sentence.

I felt nervous when the game began. I was really excited because I went to see a match of football of my favourite team. The match began and the stadium was really noisy. The other team was Manchester city, the manchester city has the best coach that I see. FC Barcelona did have Pep Guardiola but now he was with manchester.

2: Effect on the target reader
The match began and the stadium was really noisy doesn’t really fit in the context of the paragraph. If we think about the known-new contract, the reader probably expects this sentence to explain who his favourite team is, and connect to some information about the other team in the next sentence.

3: Known-new contract
The reader expects this sentence to explain who the best coach is. Instead, we jump to some information about the teams who are playing. This unexpected leap doesn’t hold the target reader’s attention - a necessary feature if students want to get high marks for communicative achievement. To solve this, Jaime just needs to flip the sentence and make Pep Guardiola the subject of this sentence.

4: Topic sentences
This paragraph seems to explain what happened in the game, and explain how Jaime felt through the rest of the story. However, because the reader usually expects the first sentence to signal the paragraph’s topic, it is confusing. We might expect more information about the coach. To solve this, Jaime just needs to take out this sentence. The next one becomes the topic, and coherence and cohesion is much stronger. Students love to throw extra ideas into their writing, especially if they haven’t planned their ideas beforehand. A simple plan of the two or three topic sentences needed for the question will solve this.

5: Language issues
There are quite a few language errors here, and Jaime would benefit from using a few more adjectives and adverbs. This is something that comes with time; whilst I might want to correct some of the bigger issues which might confuse the target reader (such as later of the break), although I don’t want to focus too much on the language in one go. Just as we would try to improve fluency in speaking, so we should aim to improve it in writing, too.

Although stories have traditionally been quite unpopular at B1 level (numbers suggest fewer than 10% of candidates choose it), they can be a fun task and a great way of showing a variety of grammar structures and coloured language. After spending 30 minutes exploring features of a good story, I set my class 30 minutes to write a B1 story. Doing it class meant they had the comfort of their peers, the support of their teacher, and a dedicated amount of time. Whilst it’s true that writing in class can be time consuming, it’s also an excellent way of developing a writing skill. After the class I used their texts to identify some typical issues to focus on over the first term, before the first mock exam.
Learning to write is like learning any other skill - it needs time and support.

I’ll always remember the way that Paul Hillman at ELA in Úbeda tackled a pushy parent. She was determined that her son, who had just level-tested as pre-intermediate, be placed in the B1 group. His friends at school were in B1, so he ought to be to. She wasn’t concerned that his test score was well below the level. He’ll just work harder, she said.

Paul then asked her about learning to drive. He asked her if her son would be ready to pass the practical as soon as he’d done the theory. Of course the answer was a resounding NO. You couldn’t possibly learn to drive in such a short space of time.

Language skills are just the same. The theories I’ve outlined above honestly do work wonders when it comes to improving students’ writing ability, but they need time to practice and develop them. So, here are 10 practical ways you can do just that. These are tried-and-tested activities and approaches, and all of them are easily adaptable to online and hybrid teaching.

**What’s the topic sentence?**
Take a variety of texts at the students’ level. Remove the topic sentences, and highlight relevant words in the rest of the paragraph to act as clues. SS need to predict the topic sentence. They’ll probably never get it exactly right, but they will start to get the gist. This is a great way of practising writing topic sentences, and focusing students on how the rest of the paragraph depends on this first sentence.

**MENTIMETER**
Make the brainstorming of topic sentences for article y more interactive by setting it up as an open-ended question on Mentimeter.com. In class, just give them the code and they can brainstorm topic sentences on their phones, and then as a class you vote on your favourites to use in their writing.

**Self-reflection**
Have you noticed how your teenagers rush through writing as quickly as possible? Everything’s a race for them. This activity forces them to slow down and reflect on their writing. Before they submit or publish their work (i.e. share it for the class), set them a few questions related to the writing task and the things you have been working on in class, plus a final question asking them if it’s their best work. These give them a chance to review their work according to what you as the teacher expects and helps make them become more reflective learners.
**MICROWRITING**

I picked this up from Ceri Jones the last time TESOL Spain was in Sevilla. I suspect one of the reasons that teachers are so reluctant to deal with writing in the class is out of the fear that it takes too long. Actually, the domain where our students are likely to write means that microwriting is actually quite an authentic approach. Ask your students when was the last time they wrote an email, and they'll tell you about the last homework they had. Ask them when they last wrote a whatsapp, and it'll be 10 minutes earlier. Writing just a few sentences (like, a paragraph perhaps!) is much less daunting for the students, much easier to fit in to class, and far easier for us to assess.

One great way of using microwriting in class is as part of those pesky lead-in questions at the start of a lesson. You know the ones - you set them off in pairs, and 30 seconds later someone has shouted finished! Instead, give them one minute to read and think about the questions. Then they have another two minutes to write a response either on their phones or in the chatbox. When the time is up they send it to you, and close the window. They turn to the partner and discuss. This time, it goes on for much longer because they’ve already had two opportunities to rehearse their ideas and really think about what they want to say. It’s a great example of how a short writing task can give students the confidence to speak.

**COLLABORATIVE WRITING ON PADLET**

Padlet works really well for collaborative writing tasks, either during class time or done asynchronously. Once we’ve done the typically question breakdown and brainstorming as a class, I’ll put them into groups to plan their answer together. Remember that planning really just needs to be writing the topic sentences (not the draft version that they might do in school). I usually ask them to show me their topic sentences (one for each person in the group works well) before I share the Padlet link with them.

The great thing about Padlet is the anonymity; it frees the students up and makes them much more likely to produce good language if they know that others can’t see it’s them writing. Make sure you change the settings to allow anyone to edit a post, as this way they can continue to work collaboratively with editing, organisation, and feedback.

**PARAGRAPH OF THE WEEK**

It takes time to get the paragraph right - it is a skill, after all! Each week, write one paragraph together as a class. This can be a really easy two or three minutes in each lesson. The first is spent brainstorming ideas and proposing topic sentences. The second adds a sentence to expand the idea. The third gives an example and closes the paragraph. There’s no need to send this home either, all of this can be done as a fun cooler between activities.

**USE STIMULATING IMAGES**

*Your English teacher has asked you to write a story. This is the title for your story:*

**A picnic that went wrong.**

It’s the typical B1 story question, which might be part of the reason why less than 10% of candidates answer the story question in the first place. When you’re B1 though, writing anything in the exam can be difficult, especially if you’re afraid that the teacher/examiner is going to think your ideas are silly. On the other hand, you might not care at all what the teacher thinks and write about terrorists and zombies eating the picnic before you woke up at the end of a dream. Either way, ideas are hard at this level.

What if we stimulated a writing question with a picture like this one. Suddenly there’s a lot of clear possibilities about how the picnic went wrong, and how the story ended.

**TRY MARKING WITHOUT A MARK!**

Have you noticed how as teachers we are often so eager to give things a mark? I’m sure a large part of this is down to the culture of education that we are a part of. When students produce something, especially if it is in their own time, we need to assess how well they did it. Marks are important, but they can also be very distracting. I recently stepped back into formal education for the first time in 10 years and was amazed myself how much importance the grade of my assignments was. More important, in some cases, than the actual feedback.

Suddenly, halfway through the course, one of our tutors chose to give an ungraded assignment. It was still obligatory: if we didn’t do it we’d still get the equivalent of a phonecall home. But the focus had shifted. When the feedback came through I was much more interested in the feedback than worried about ‘what did I get?’. An important stage in this was going into the assignment knowing it was ungraded, as this removed any expectation of that number. It also took some of the stress out of the assignment. It wasn’t important. We could certainly argue that a teenager faced with this situation would simply choose not to do the work so well. I think there’s a cultural argument here, as in the culture of our classroom. Perhaps the first time the teenager will take it a little less seriously, but the more the exercise repeats...
ENGAGING ASSESSMENT SCALES
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USE A RECIPE
I love baking. My partner would tell you that my best is a moist carrot cake with creamy Philadelphia frosting, which I think will be her birthday cake until we’re 80 and too diabetic to eat it. It’s actually Delia’s best. I’m now a pretty competent baker who can create his own recipes, but I didn’t start like that. At the start of this guide we explored Jaime’s writing. It was OK, but it wasn’t something he could rely on for exam success. Nine months later, I gave the class back their stories, unedited, and told them to write it again. This is what Jaime produced.

This second version is a culmination of 9 months’ writing teaching. We started with work on the target reader, moved on to look at the order of information, and then to topic sentences. By Christmas we were collaborating on writing every week, asynchronously, in a non-assessed way. After the first mock exam, we started exploring specific exam writing strategies, and continued with everything that had come before, slowly building in the language they were learning. Right before their second mock exam, I showed them the recipes.

These are writing guides, first developed by Paul Hillman at ELA in Úbeda, who also loves baking. They show a student what a good text at B1 level is, and what ingredients they need to use. They’re very much based in a product model of writing, but remember that my job as a teacher is to find ways to help students communicate in English. The exam part is always secondary. A recipe means that even the weakest student has the support they need to create a great answer in the writing paper.

When all’s said and done, we can get back to teaching students to communicate.

THE ARTICLE IN PART 2 CAN BE A GREAT OPTION – I’M JUST NEED TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN AN INTERESTING AND CREATIVE WAY. REMEMBER TO BE AMBITIOUS WITH YOUR GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY!

INGREDIENTS
FOR THE RECIPE QUESTION/ANSWERS INTEREST YOU IN YOUR WRITING?

What you need:
- A strong interest in your writing
- A clear idea of what you want to write about

IMPORTANT: Use short words to talk about the recipe
- “A” = one article (a, an, the) before the noun
- “An” = one article (a, an) before the noun

ADD A PIN: Add an adjective to your description instead of being bare bones
- “Big” = big
- “Small” = small
- “Tasty” = tasty
- “Great” = great
- “Lukewarm” = lukewarm

NEED HELP? Ask your teacher for help with your recipe

METHOD
1. Read the recipe carefully. Think about the goals and find the three questions.
2. Make some short notes on how you can answer the questions.
3. Think of some different words, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs to use in the writing.
4. Choose some different grammar structures you can use in the article.
5. Read the article carefully. Think about how you can keep the writing interesting, and here are some ideas on how to begin reading your recipe.
6. Remember to use a variety of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in your writing.
7. Read the recipe again. Have you included all the necessary information?
8. Check your work carefully for your final version. It will take about 15 minutes.
Further reading


Available at cambridge.org/cambridge-papers-elt


Go to www.eltexperiments.com for more resources and ideas for teaching writing for exam students.

All ideas and opinions expressed in this guide are my own, and are in no way affiliated with Cambridge Assessment English or any other exam board. Please contact me if you have any questions or comments about the information in this guide.

Writing in the exam: recipes for success - a writing guide for teachers of B1+
Written in preparation for TESOL Spain Online 2021
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