

# The Teachers' Guide to Literacy Research

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## Part III. Children's Writing

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## An Introduction to Our Research

We are all aware of the worryingly low reading levels of children in the country. In order to be able to improve the teaching and learning of literacy, we need to understand *why* children are facing difficulties. A research study called LiRIL (Literacy Research in Indian Languages) was designed after a national consultation on Early Literacy in 2011 to investigate this.

The LiRIL study tracked over 700 children from the beginning of Grade 1 to the end of Grade 3 in government schools in Wada block, Palghar, Maharashtra and Yadgir block, Yadgir, Karnataka. Our broad objective was to understand how children learned to read and write in Indian scripts and contexts, particularly children studying in government schools in



very socioeconomically disadvantaged areas of the country. During this study we assessed 360 students per site, twice a year, for three years, on a range of skills and sub-skills of literacy. In this way, we could understand how children were learning to read and write Marathi and Kannada, and the challenges they faced in the process. We also analysed curricula, interviewed and assessed teachers, and observed classroom instruction. In addition to this, we worked with 48 of these children (24 per site) closely to understand specifics about how they engaged with and comprehended texts. Finally, we carried out three case studies to look deeply at children's lives at home and their connection or disconnection with the school.

In these Teachers' Guides, we share three select topics from our research that are relevant to classroom teaching and learning. These are:

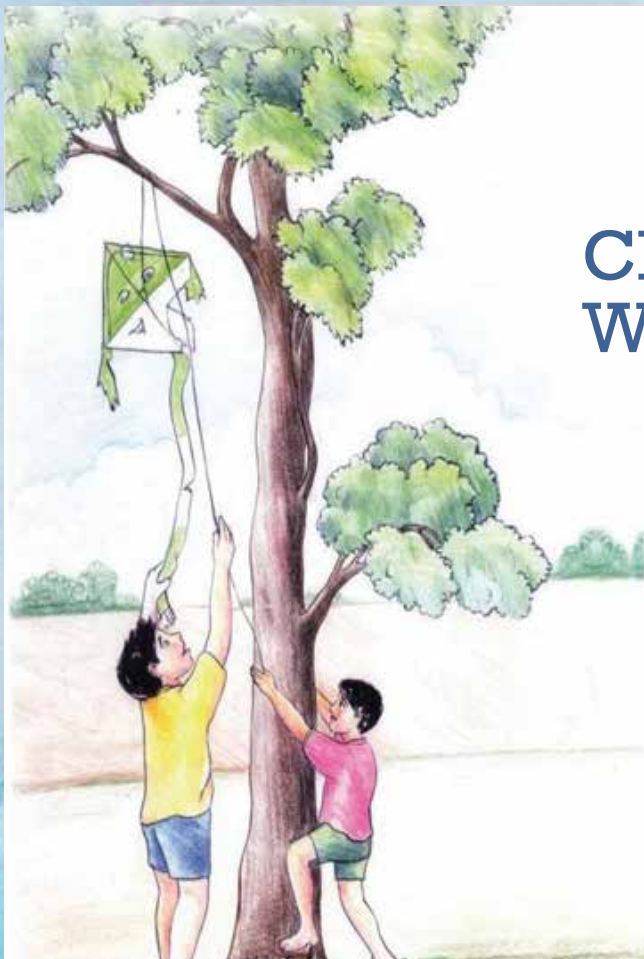
1. Teaching and Learning the Script
2. Comprehension

### **3. Children's Writing**

We hope that our learnings will help to make your teaching of language in classrooms stronger, as you understand the reasons behind children's difficulties.

Along with our findings, we will also share some strategies that you can use in the classroom. Please use these as beginning tools as you develop your own techniques to improve your children's writing.

## Children's Writing



एके दिवशी चिनु व तिनू पंतळा उडवण्या  
गेले. जोराने वारा आल्यामुळे त्यांचे पंतळा  
झळझळीत अडकून त्या पंतळाला दानडोळे  
होते. एक लोंडं होते. त्यांनी पंतळा काढण्याचा  
वराच प्रयत्न केला पण त्याच काही पंतळा  
खाली आलाच नाही. चिनु दोरी खेचू  
आताही त्यांचा पंतळा काही झिझलाच  
नाही. प्रवाह झुमझुमीत वारा झाला व अडकलेल्या  
प्रयत्न करत होता तरीही पंतळा काही खाली  
आलाच नाही.

One day, Chinu & Tinu went to fly kites. Because of the strong wind, their kite got stuck on a tree. The kite had two eyes and one mouth. They tried very hard to remove the kite but the kite did not come down. Chinu tried to pull the string but the kite did not come down. Then the other boy tried to climb the tree but the kite did not come down.

# Introduction

# Introduction

Children’s writing can show rich imagination and sensitivity. Do you notice how the child writer in the sample above has given the kite, eyes and a mouth? Perhaps if the child had a chance to write more we would have got to know more about the kite and what it feels like to fly.

Writing is meaningful for children because it allows them to express their emotions and thoughts. When we encourage children to read, write and discuss their work, we let them know that sharing their responses, thoughts and feelings are important. Developing children’s processes of writing can, therefore, be a way to help children think and express themselves better. In this booklet, we look at how writing develops and what we can do as teachers to aid strong writing.

## **What are we going to learn about in this teaching guide?**

We are going to take an in-depth look at children’s writing in this booklet based on our data from the LiRIL project.

This Guide is organized into six main sections.

**In Section I**, before we begin looking closely at children’s writing, we will look briefly at the history of writing in education. How did educators think of writing earlier? How has this changed over time?

**In Section II**, we will look at children’s early attempts at writing. We will understand how the child’s writing develops over time by looking at real examples of children’s writing. These examples show that children go through known phases as they learn to write.

**In Section III**, we ask, ‘What is good writing?’ and ‘How do we assess children’s writing?’ We describe six “traits” of writing that have come to be very important in how teachers teach and assess writing.

**In Section IV**, we show you how students in the LiRIL study performed on a writing task given to them. We present examples of their writing in each grade, from Grade 1 to Grade 3. We use this data to discuss how our students progress over time, and the areas in which they struggle.

**In Section V**, we look at how writing is taught. What are the common trends in our teaching that may lead to student struggles? We again use LiRIL data to describe the teaching of writing in classrooms in Maharashtra.

**In Section VI**, we look at what we can do in our classrooms to teach writing better. We take you step-by-step through a recommendation section that you can put to use and implement with young students you work with, in order to help them become good and aware writers.



Section 1

# The story of teaching writing

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## SECTION I:

# THE STORY OF TEACHING WRITING

Once upon a time (not very long ago), handwriting was thought to be a very important aspect of writing. Along with good handwriting, good spelling and punctuation were also considered to be important. It is easy to understand why this was so. Before the type-writer and computer-age, people relied on good handwriting and spelling to communicate ideas accurately. Recording was an important reason why people wrote.

And so, when children started to learn to write, Teachers focused on developing good handwriting, spelling, grammar and punctuation. Later, when children were older, they were taught “composition”. Essay topics were given to children, who would then compose short or long pieces of writing.

The role of the teacher was to “correct” the child’s writing. Children would receive marks for essays they wrote, along with accompanying remarks from the teacher (for example, 4/10 “Poor”; or 8/10 “Very good”). Writing was viewed as a talent. Some children were simply better writers than others! But, what should children do to become “better” writers? No one seemed to even think about this.

In the 1970s and 1980s, many interesting changes started happening in the world of psychology and education. People became interested in studying what was happening inside our minds when we were reading and writing. They started asking interesting questions, like, “How do writers think while they are writing?” Researchers like Linda Flower and John Hayes (1981), for example, interviewed many, many writers and asked them to say aloud what was going on in their minds as they wrote. Their work, and the work of several others like them, showed us that there is a *process* involved in writing well. Good writers plan, translate their ideas onto paper, and revise their ideas. This was very

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interesting to teachers. Earlier, people were only interested in the finished *products* of writing. Now, they were getting ideas about the *process* of writing. And so the question for teachers was now, “How can we teach children the writing process?” We will come back to this question later on in this guide.

A few years after Flower and Hayes, other researchers started looking at how young children learn to write. Anne Dyson (1990) explained that very young children learn many different “symbol systems” at the same time. A “symbol” is when one thing stands for, or represents something else. So, for example, when we speak we make sounds that stand for something else. When we say “horse”, we are making a sound to represent the four legged animal that we can ride. In Hindi, we would say “*ghoda*” to represent the same animal. “Ghoda” and “horse” are all different “symbols” for this animal. In the same way, numbers are also symbols. When we write “1”, it means that we are trying to represent one thing. When we draw, we use shapes to represent objects, ideas, moods, people, and so on. When we write, we are making marks on the page, and each mark (or *akshara*) represents one sound. So, all of these—talking, counting, drawing, writing—are “symbol systems”. Anne Dyson found that when children learn these symbol systems, the boundaries between them is not very clear in their minds. Children talk while they are writing, and sometimes their talk says more than their writing. Children also draw, make gestures, or act-out what they are trying to write. A child might make a dot on the page, but when they tell you the story behind that dot, they may tell you about a truck that goes “vrooom!” and travels all around the classroom. Writing, talking, gesturing and playing are all a part of this story. Anne Dyson advised teachers to allow young children to mix all the symbol systems when they start to learn to write.



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What do children’s initial writing attempts look like? When we look at young children’s early attempts to write, we see another interesting pattern emerging. We find that young children do not start writing by printing perfect *aksharas* on the page. Instead, they initially scribble on the page. Sometimes, they draw. Or, draw and scribble. After some time, their scribbles start looking more and more like *aksharas* we recognize. Then, we see recognizable *aksharas*. Sometimes, the *aksharas* may be “grouped” to look like “words”, but when we try to read the “words” — they may mean nothing! Later, a child may start trying to spell words, but may not be able to spell them like adults do. Only after a long process do young children start writing and spelling words like adults expect them to! We will show you examples of young children’s writing in the next section.

As teachers, it helps to know how a child learns to write. Even very young children can “write”—but their writing may not consist of correctly spelled words neatly arranged into sentences. It could consist of scribbling, drawing, talking, dramatizing something, and imperfectly spelled words all mixed together. Providing children with opportunities to experiment is important. As they grow slightly older, it also becomes important to teach them the writing process—how to plan, translate ideas into words and sentences, and revise their writing.

Let us look at some examples of children’s writing from the LiRIL (Marathi) data now, and see how it develops over time.



## Section II

What is emergent  
writing and  
how does it look?

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## Section II: Children’s Emergent Writing in Marathi

In this section, we will look at eight samples of children’s writing to see how children’s writing develops, or “emerges” over time. It is interesting to actually look at real writing samples so that we can see exactly how children form shapes and *aksharas* and write with “invented” spelling.

### The writing task

As part of the LiRIL assessments, we gave children one of the two pictures shown here (see Figure 1) and asked them to write a story about what they saw. These pictures served as picture prompts for writing. We administered this assessment twice per year, over three years, when the children in our sample were in Grades 1, 2 and 3. Each year, they saw Picture 1 once; and Picture 2 once. We encouraged children to draw if they were reluctant to write. When we couldn’t read what a child had written/drawn, we asked the child to tell us what they had written, and we wrote down whatever they said. Of course, all this happened in Marathi. For the purposes of this booklet, we have presented children’s original writing in Marathi and a translation of what they wrote in Hindi. Each sample of writing is followed by an explanation.

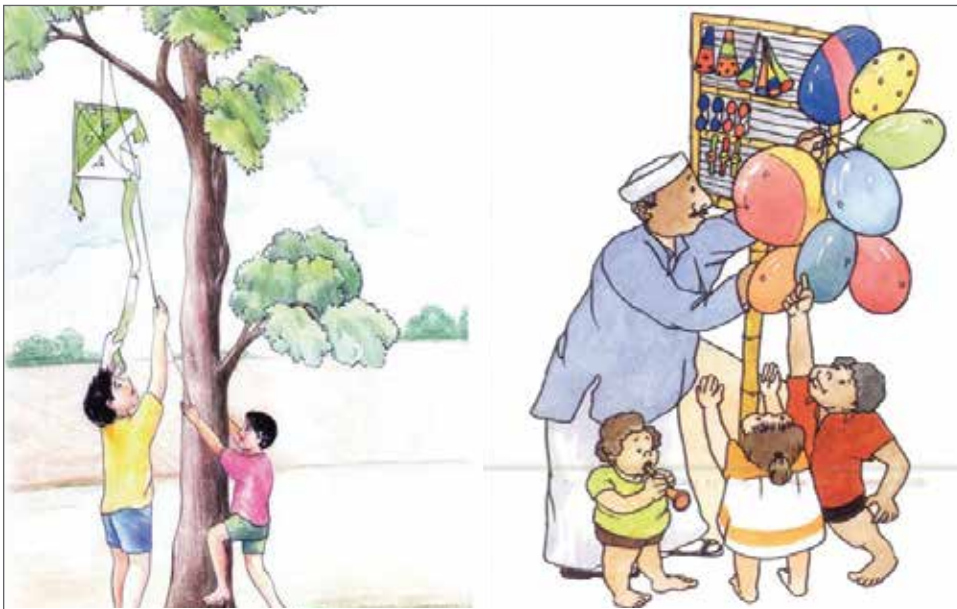


Figure 1. The pictures given to children for the LiRIL prompted writing task.

So, let us look at children's responses.

(These samples are taken from the writing of several different children, hence, they do not show one child's writing over time).

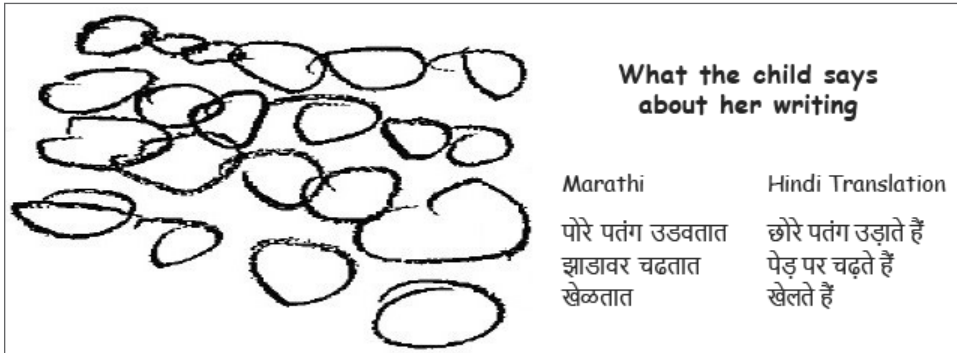


Figure 2. Scribbling: Random shapes. Drawn during the beginning of Grade 1.

At the earliest phase of writing (see Figure 2) the child draws or makes random scribbles. In this case, she has drawn separate shapes that are connected and organised line by line, similar to the way in which we write. The scribbles don't look like letters. The child describes what she has written in minimal phrases, and these link to the picture of the boys flying the kite.

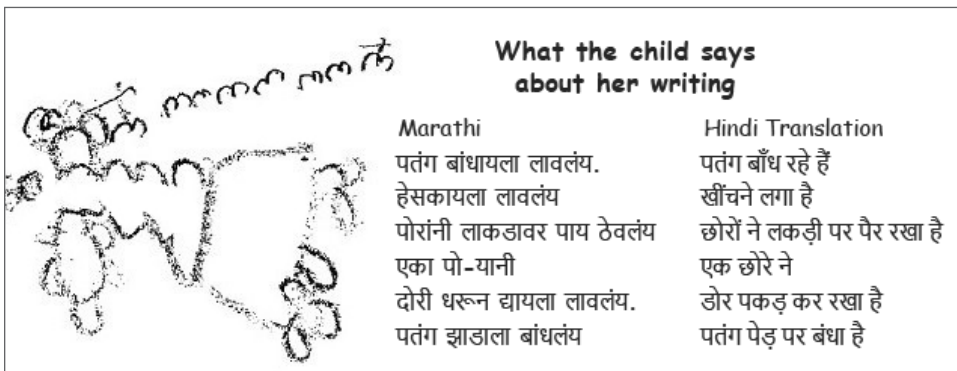



Figure 3. Drawing and scribbling: letter-like forms. Drawn during the beginning of Grade 1.

In Figure 3 we see that the child has started making letter like shapes. In this picture  is like the *akshara* ल. The child makes an initial attempt at drawing the tree in the picture she was given. You can see that proportions are not yet like the image being drawn. Orally, the child can describe the picture in brief sentences and phrases. These sentences and phrases accurately describe the picture, but there is not much flow or imagination to the way in which the thoughts are expressed.

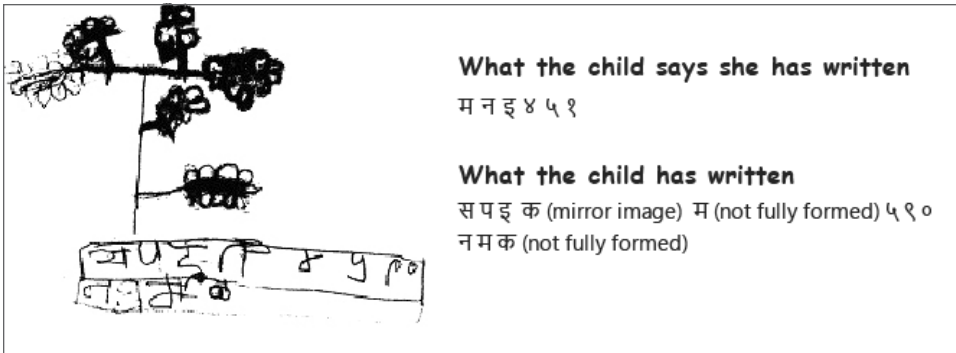


Figure 4. Drawing and writing of letters and letter-like forms. Written during the beginning of Grade 1.

In Figure 4 we see that the child starts writing some conventional *aksharas* and numbers. Some of the *aksharas* are accurate, some are mirror images and some not yet fully formed. The child's picture now shows some proportion and details. When asked about what she has written the child "reads out" the *aksharas* and numbers she has written on the page; but some of them are incorrectly recognized.

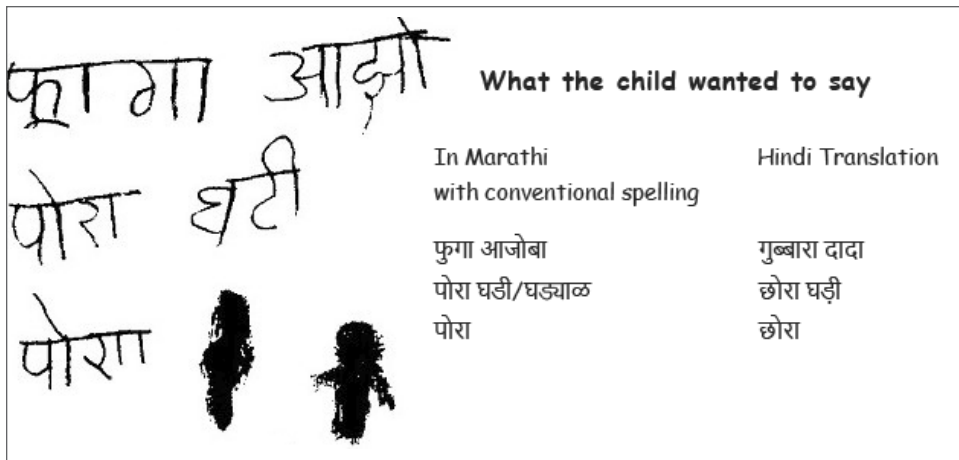
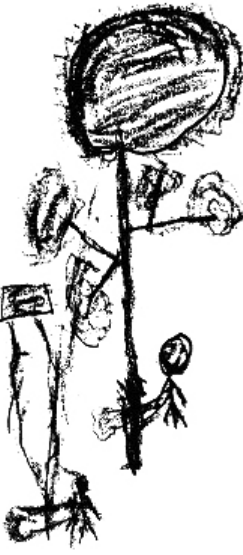


Figure 5. Invented spellings. Written at the end of Grade 1.

By now, the child has started writing conventional words. She uses invented spelling when she writes (adding extra *matraas* or leaving out some *aksharas*). She now uses regular spacing between words.





भाऊ झाडावर  
चढत आहे एक दादा  
पतंग उडवत आहे

**What the child wanted to say**

In Marathi with conventional spelling	Hindi Translation
भाऊ झाडावर	भाई पेड़ पर
चढत आहे एक दादा	चढ़ रहा है एक भैया
पतंग उडवत आहे	पतंग उड़ा रहा है

Figure 6. Conventionally spelled words appear: Sample 1. Written at the beginning of Grade 2.

By this phase, the child's spelling is mostly correct with simple words. She does not yet separate all the words, some are clubbed together. There is no punctuation, so sentences run into each other. The writing is more like informal, quick speech than formal writing. Her picture now has proportion, details and a three dimensional look. Descriptions are brief, but accurate.

**What the child wanted to say**

In Marathi with conventional spelling	Hindi Translation
फुग्या वाला आदोत बाला पेशना पिवला रंग फुगा जांभळा चष्मा लाल रंग फुगा पाहिजे घड्याळ किती रुपये चष्मा पाहिजे. किती?	गुब्बारा वाला है छोरे को पीला रंग गुब्बारा, जामुनी रंग गुब्बारा, लाल रंग गुब्बारा चाहिए । घड़ी कितने रुपये? चश्मा चाहिए । कितना?

Figure 7. Conventional spelling appears: Sample 2. Written at the end of Grade 2.

The child's spelling continues to be mostly correct with simple words. *Matraas* are still somewhat difficult for the child. She sometimes uses the wrong *matraa* or adds or omits an *akshara*. But, overall, her spelling is more accurate. She uses multiple sentences that start in different ways. Interestingly, she starts experimenting with dialogue in her story. She also plays with sentence structure, putting in questions (although she does not yet use punctuation).

<p>In Marathi with conventional spelling</p>	<p>Hindi Translation</p>
<p>एक फुगेवाला दादा फुगे घेऊन आला. मला लाल फुगा पाहिजे. त्याची किंमत काय आहे. वीस रुपये आहे. मला हिरवा फुगे पाहिजे आहे.</p>	<p>एक गुब्बारा वाला भैया गुब्बारा लेकर आया मुझे लाल गुब्बारा चाहिए। उसकी कीमत कितनी है? बीस रुपए. मुझे हरा गुब्बारा चाहिए।</p>

Figure 8. Conventionally spelled writing. Written at the beginning of Grade 3.

The child's spelling is almost entirely conventional, except for words that are spelt a little differently from the way they sound in informal language (she has confused पाहिजे with पायजे). Her sentences vary in length and structure. The child now moves from description to dialogue in her story. She explains what has happened (and builds some context for the reader) and then gives details of the interaction between herself and the balloon seller through dialogue. There is a sense of sequence in the story. With the word मुझे there is a sense of what the writer wants. This gives the story some feeling and voice.

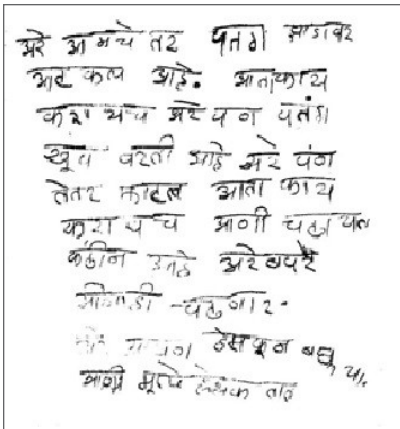
	In Marathi with conventional spelling	Hindi Translation
	<p>अरे, आमचे तर पतंग झाडावर अडकलेला आहे. आता काय करायचंय? अरे, पण पतंग खूप वरती आहे. अरे पण ते तर फाटलंय. आता काय करायचं? आणि चढायला कठीण आहे. अरे बापरे! मी नाही चढणार. हे आपण हेसकून (खेचून) बघूया. आणि मुले हेसकतात (खेचतात).</p>	<p>अरे! हमारा पतंग तो पेड़ पर अटक गया। अब क्या करें? अरे! पर पतंग बहुत ऊपर है। अरे! पतंग फट गया है। अब क्या करें? और चढ़ना भी कठिन है। अरे बाप रे! मैं नहीं चढ़ूंगा। हे, हम खींच के देखते हैं। और बच्चे खींचते हैं।</p>

Figure 9. Development of feeling and voice. Written at the end of Grade 3.

We can see with this piece of writing that the child's voice comes across strongly. The writing is peppered with exclamations of अरे that really give you a feel of the children's reaction to what has happened. There is a sense of live action as the children observe what has happened (हमारा पतंग तो पेड़ पर अटक गया) and think aloud about what to do (अभी क्या करें), assess the situation (पर पतंग बहुत ऊपर है) and decide the course of action (हम खींच के देखते हैं). From dialogue and the thinking that forms most of this writing, suddenly, the last sentence moves into a description. We move from hearing a story, to being told a story. This shift shows a maturity in writing. It shows that the writer has a sense that a story is both about what is happening (and getting the reader involved in that through characters' conversation) and how things are described. This writer is now showing an understanding of how stories are written.

It is interesting to look at children's early writing attempts and see the phases they go through, isn't it? At first, the writing looks a lot like scribbling, then the child makes connected shapes and then *akshara*-like shapes, before the child starts writing recognizable *aksharas*. Invented spellings are also quite interesting to look at, because they represent children's initial attempts to match sounds and *aksharas*. Sometimes they get it right, sometimes wrong, sometimes partially right or partially wrong. Simpler words appear first, then more complicated words and punctuation marks. What is clear is that throughout this time, from the very first sample, we can see the child's ideas developing. From phrases, to simple descriptions, to fuller descriptions and dialogue, the child's writing becomes richer and richer. Knowing this, it becomes necessary for teachers to talk to children

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about their writing and hear their stories even when they are very young. Writing down children's stories can help encourage early writers by showing them that their own words and ideas can be put down on paper. By writing their orally dictated stories next to their drawings and invented spellings, we also show them that what they say matters to us. Finally, this becomes an opportunity for us to model "correct" spelling and punctuation for children without discouraging them from continuing to use invented spellings in their own writing.

Now that we have looked at how a child begins to write, let us look at how we can continue to encourage the development of good writing from an early age. What is it that we, as teachers, can focus on to help our children write well?

To answer this question, let us think about good writing and what it means.



Section III

# What is good writing?

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## Section III: What is good writing?

Think about a person who you believe is a good writer. Write down the qualities that you think make them good at writing.

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The famous author and playwright, Oscar Wilde, once said:



If people cannot write well,  
they cannot think well,  
and if they cannot think well,  
others will do their thinking for them.



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What does this quote mean to you? Often in school, children are taught to spell words correctly and write with neat handwriting. But, this quote says that writing is related to thinking! What does that mean?

It means that good writing is about more than good spelling or handwriting. Writers express their thinking through their writing. They communicate their thoughts and experiences and express their feelings effectively. They think about who will read their work and how to interest their readers. Writing well can help people talk about what matters to them in ways that matter to others. Good writers make people take notice of life.

### What are the “traits” of good writing?

Good writing can have a lot of power, but how do we work towards developing good writers? In this section, we will describe certain “traits” or characteristics of good writing. The idea that writing can be discussed in terms of several dimensions or “traits” came up in the 1970s and 1980s when several educators began a search for classroom assessment strategies that are helpful to writers. Various dimensions were proposed, researched and revised. In 1999, these were formalized as “6 + 1 traits” of writing. In 2003, an educator called Ruth Culham further revised and elaborated upon these traits.

Let us look at each of the six traits of writing. What are they? What do they mean?

#### 1. Ideas

Ideas are what make up the main message of a piece of writing. Ideas are well developed if they are supported by details that add on to the main message. Initially, ideas may just be presented as labels (“kite”, “boys”, “trees”; etc.), or as simple descriptions, for example, “पतंग उड़ा रहा है. पतंग अटक गया” (“Flying the kite. The kite is stuck”). When the idea is mature and more fully developed, then children are able to write with some interesting details.

For example, “...फिर से कोशिश की । फिर भी पतंग नीचे गिरा नहीं । फिर उन्होंने डोरी ली और हल्के से खींचे पर पतंग नीचे आया नहीं” (“They tried again. Still the kite didn’t fall. Then, they took the string and pulled it gently, but the kite didn’t come down.”) Details like “हल्के से” (gently) give us specifics about how the characters are moving — using patience, effort and gentleness — to try to coax the kite down from the tree. This helps us understand their effort much better.



## 2. Organisation

Organisation refers to how the ideas are arranged in the writing. As described earlier, in the initial phases of writing, children often just label the picture: “पतंग, लड़का, पेड़” (“kite, boy, tree”) or describe the picture “एक पतंग है। दो लड़के हैं”



(“There is one tree. There are two boys). Sometimes, there is no particular organization to the description, for example, in Figure 5. Later, we see that children’s sense of sequence starts to develop. Children begin to use words that give a sense of sequence, like “फिर”, and “बाद में” (“then”, or “later”). Younger children may start writing a story, but then forget to end it, and so on. When organisation is mature, then, children’s stories start to have a clear beginning, middle and end.

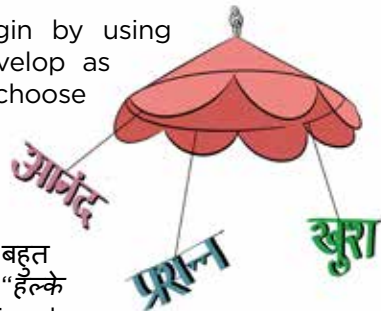
## 3. Voice

When we talk about “voice” in a writing piece, we are basically talking about communicating a mood or feeling through writing. For example, is the writer trying to communicate excitement? Is she trying to make the reader feel scared? Or, happy? It is difficult to detect voice when the writer is merely labelling the picture or producing very basic descriptions. However, when the writer starts to include dialogue, for example “घड़ी कितने रुपये?” (“How many rupees for this watch?”), we get the sense of questions and conversation; of what people are actually saying. This becomes even stronger when the writer herself or a character clearly expresses what she wants or how she feels. For example, “अरे! हमारा पतंग तो पेड़ पर अटक गया। अब क्या करें?” (“Oh, no! Our kite has got stuck in a tree! What shall we do now?”)



## 4. Word Choice

When young children write, they may begin by using common, everyday words. But, as they develop as writers, they may have a larger set of words to choose from. Do they choose and use more interesting words? The words a writer uses in her writing are important. A mature writer uses good verbs “पेड़ पर फूल खिले थे।” (“There are flowers blooming on the tree”), adjectives “उसकी रस्सी बहुत लंबी थी।” (“Its rope was very long”) and adverbs “हल्के से खींचे” (“pulled gently”). Good word choice is when words are distinct, interesting and accurate. They make you take notice of what the writer is trying to say, and draw you into the writing.





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## 5. Sentence Fluency and Grammar

Sentence fluency is about how a piece of writing sounds when you read it. Does it sound like “real” language, or does it sound forced and artificial?

When young children start writing, they may start with short sentences that have the same structure. For example: “एक पेड़ है । दो लड़के हैं । एक पतंग है ।” (“There is a tree. There are two boys. There is a kite.”)

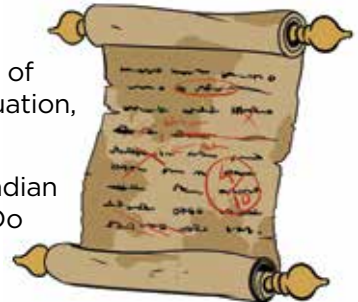


Mature writers use different sentence structures to keep the reader interested: “हवा आयी और दोनों बच्चों ने पतंग उड़ाया । और पतंग पेड़ पर अटक गया । उसने चढ़ने की बहुत कोशिश की । पर चढ़ नहीं सका ।” (“The wind blew as both children flew the kite. And it got stuck on the tree. They tried very hard to climb the tree. But, they were not able to climb it.”)

## 6. Conventions

The Conventions trait is the mechanical correctness of the piece and includes five elements: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar usage, and paragraphing

This trait is the one that we usually teach children in Indian classrooms. Are children able to write “correctly”? Do they spell words? Use punctuation (full stops, question marks, etc.)? Use correct grammar? Separate longer writing pieces into paragraphs?



The LiRIL team developed and adapted its rubric from Culham’s original rubric to assess our children as their writing develops with Indian scripts. We piloted the rubric on 250 children in Maharashtra and Karnataka, and based on their responses, we revised the rubric to suit the responses we were actually getting from the field. For example, children in our sample did not write very much. This made it difficult for us to assess their writing on certain traits. In our version of the rubric, we have clubbed together ideas and organisation, even though they are actually two different traits. We have therefore assessed children’s writing on five (and not six) dimensions. We also revised the descriptions of different levels of writing to suit our sample population’s responses.

Now that we know what the traits of good writing are, let us look at how the students we assessed performed in their writing.



Section IV

How do children  
perform on  
writing?

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## Section IV: How did children in the LiRIL sample (Wada) perform on writing?

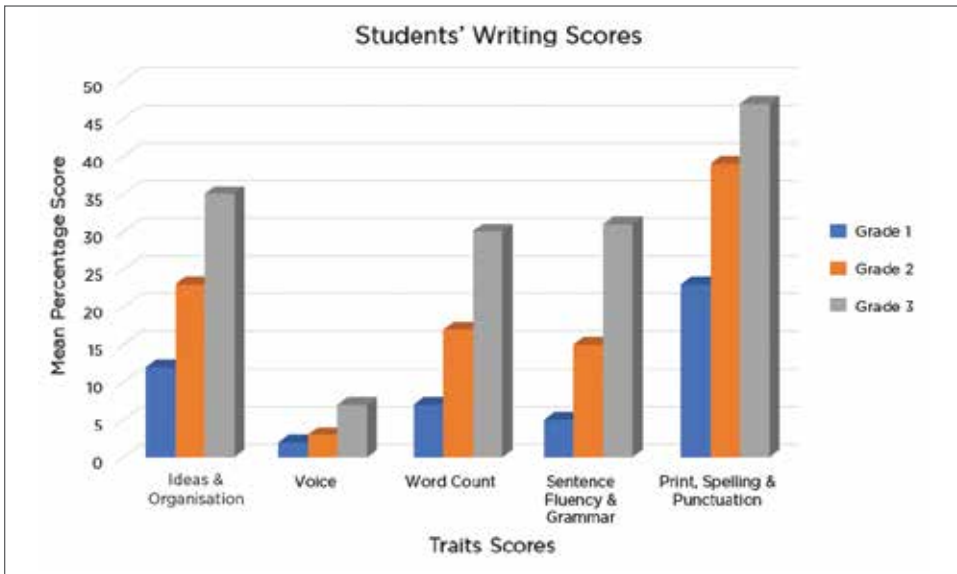


Figure 10. Students' writing performance on the six traits.

From this graph, it is clear that students' writing performance improves very little after three years of schooling. We see the most progress in conventions of printing/ handwriting and spelling (perhaps because this is focused on the most in classrooms). Despite teachers giving specific feedback on these conventions, students only score an average of 45% on this component, by the end of Grade 3. This is very poor, especially because this is often the entire focus of teaching writing.

But, if we look at Voice — the child's ability to express feeling in their writing — we see that after being in school for three years, students score an average of only 5%! When stories are bereft of feeling, do they count as stories?

But what do these figures really mean? Let us look more closely. Here, to give you a sense of what the child's writing looks like, are three writing samples. Each sample represents the performance of a "typical" child at the end of Grade 1, Grade 2 and Grade 3, respectively. We calculated the "modal score", the score representing the greatest number of students for that assessment round. Then, we matched up this score with a writing sample from a child who had got this score. Let's have a look.

## End of Grade 1

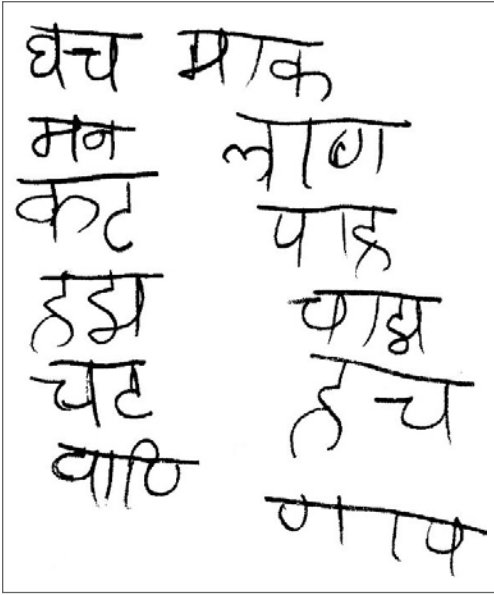


Figure 11. Sample of student writing at the end of Grade 1.

able to group these *aksharas* together to make word-like forms. However, these are not meaningful words.

It is not possible to translate these words into Hindi, because they are non-meaningful words that the child has written. Except for the word मन (mind), none of these words have meaning

**Ideas and Organisation:** When asked what they have written, most children at the end of Grade 1 orally labelled the picture prompt they were given. They were not able to represent these labels in writing.

**Voice, Word Choice and Sentence Fluency:** Most children wrote non-meaningful words at the end of Grade 1, making it difficult to rate these three dimensions.

**Print:** Most children are able to form some *aksharas* and some are able to group these *aksharas* together to make word-like forms. However,

## End of Grade 2

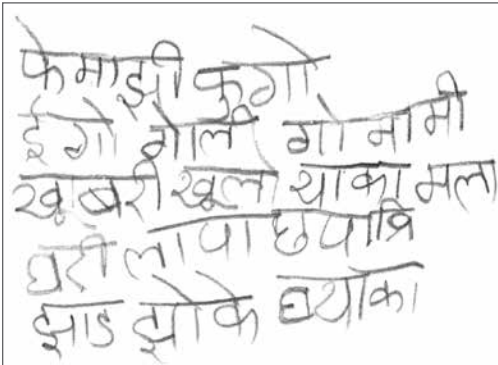


Figure 12. Sample of student writing at the end of Grade 2.

used to convey what is in the picture. Some irrelevant words that have nothing to do with the picture prompt are also written down.

The Hindi translation of this piece (with corrected spellings):

मेरा गुब्बारा । गुबारा गया । मामी खूब...  
खेलें । मुझे घर छुपा-छुपी पेड़ झूला घयाका  
[unknown word]

**Ideas and Organisation:** Here, we see that the child describes the pictures in phrases. However, there is no sequence or storyline present.

**Voice:** There is not enough text to convey a mood or a feeling.

**Word Choice:** Limited words are used to convey what is in the picture. Some irrelevant words that have nothing to do with the picture prompt are also written down.

**Sentence Fluency and Grammar:** Meaningful words are written separately but there are out of place words and phrases. Full sentences are not yet formed.

**Print:** By the end of Grade 2, most children in Wada were able to write short sentences with meaningful words. But, some of the words are misspelled. Most of the spelling errors are related to *matraas*. There is some confusion about different *aksharas* as well, for example, between *aksharas* with sounds that are slightly similar like प and ब.

### End of Grade 3

Translation of this piece in Hindi (with corrected spellings):

एक गुब्बारा वाला था। एक लड़की ने पिपिहरी लिया।

एक लड़की ने गुबारा लिया।

और लड़के ने भी गुबारा लिया। और वहाँ घड़ी थी। और चश्मा है। और वहाँ पिपिहरी भी थी।

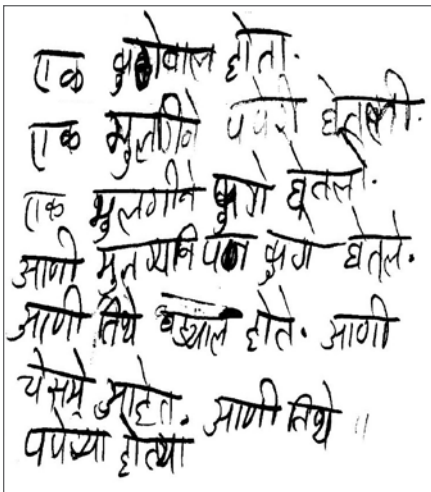


Figure 13. Sample of student writing at the end of Grade 3.

**Ideas and Organisation:** By the end of Grade 3, most children in Wada were able to describe the picture in sentences. But, even by this age, we don't see any sequence or organization of ideas. There is no story line in this writing.

**Voice:** No clear mood or emotion is conveyed in most children's writing, even by the end of Grade 3.

**Word Choice:** The vocabulary used is very routine. There are no interesting words that catch the reader's attention.

**Sentence Fluency:** Simple sentences are used. The sentence structure is repetitive and choppy. It does not sound like the rhythm of oral language.

**Print:** There is a mixture of invented and conventional spelling by the end of Grade 3. Spelling errors that are made are related to *matraas* or *aksharas* that sound similar. The child has started separating out sentences with full-stops in most places. Other punctuation marks (e.g., question mark, exclamation mark, quotation marks) are not familiar to most children.

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When we look at these samples of what “most” children are able to do by the ends of Grade 1, 2 and 3, we see a trend. While we see definite progress in children’s printing after each year of school, progress in the other traits of writing remain very poor. After three years in school, most children are not able to write a short piece with a simple story line. Their writing does not show feeling. They seem to have a poor vocabulary and do not use interesting words. The sentences are boring and repetitive without much variation.

Why is it that the slow, yet steady progress we see in the child’s printing, is not mirrored in other traits?

Let us look at how children are taught writing to answer this question.



Section V

How are students  
taught writing?

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## Section V: How are students taught writing?

During writing instruction, we observed that teachers taught only the mechanical aspects of writing — how to form *aksharas*, write words with correct spelling, copy sentences from the textbook, and copy correct answers from the blackboard. There was no attention given to children communicating or expressing their thoughts through writing.

When we asked teachers about whether they give children opportunities to write, these were the kind of responses we got:

“No... The capacity for children is only half an hour. Hence, I write down sentences on board.”

“I don’t give free writing exercises because they [children] don’t know to write much.” “I ask them to write words like ‘*aai*’ [mother], ‘*baba*’ [father].”

Maharashtra’s *Balbharati* curriculum was revised in 2013 and contains several suggestions that would include a focus on meaningful writing. For example, “writing about a picture” is one of the kinds of exercises found in the textbook. Here is how we saw teachers using such exercises in the classroom:

[Classroom Observation, Wada, Grade 3]

Teacher: OK. See now. Which picture is this? Of what is the picture?

Child: Of a house?

Teacher: And what is this picture?

Child: Rabbit

Teacher: See. (Pause) Now this is a house and [this is] a rabbit... Then, what do we do? About the house. You have to... [long pause] Now you only... name... You just have to write the names here. One after the other. And you have to write well. See the picture and write about it... It [the instruction in the textbook] shouldn’t be like that. It should be “see the picture and write its name”.

Here, we see that the teacher has modified the exercise from “writing about the picture”, to “write the names of things in the picture”. The reason the teacher gives is that a child in Grade 3 will just not be able to write about the picture.

When the focus is always on “writing correctly”, the child’s chance to make meaning is lost. For example, when teachers introduce new concepts, say of a fruit or an animal, or a story, young children should be given opportunities to say what they know about it, draw what they think or



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know it to be like, share their understandings with each other, and so on. Instead, most teaching is focused on “writing correctly”. Here is an example of this common trend. This Grade 3 teacher was teaching children in class about the “सीताफल” (custard apple) fruit that many children may have seen, or eaten.

[Classroom Observation, Class 3, Wada]

The children were asked to copy down “सी - ता - फ - ल” from the board. But Snehal wrote “सी - ना - क - क”.

She then showed it to the teacher.

Teacher: Write in smaller letters. It’s so big. Write again!

After some time, she looked again at the child’s work, pointed to the second syllable and said, “Make it ता.”

Then, she looked at the third and fourth syllables. She said: “Erase it fully. Write ता / फ / ल.”

Here we see that the teacher’s feedback is limited only to spelling and handwriting. Discussions about *sitaphal*, its taste, colour, texture, or whether the student likes it, are far away from what the teacher believes to be possible for a young child. Something that can be so alive in the mind of the child is rendered into meaningless print the child does not connect with!

Since there is so much emphasis on the Conventions trait (spelling, handwriting, etc.), we would expect that children are fairly good with at least this aspect of writing. But, as we have pointed out in the first Guide of this series (on Teaching and Learning the Script), children at both our sites did not do very well even with the mechanical aspects of reading and writing! They were actually poor at writing and spelling words! The first booklet goes into detail about the reasons for this, so we won’t repeat the same information here.

But, it is important to say once more that when the focus is on copy-writing, children are not learning *akshara*-sound relationships very well. So, even their spelling is quite poor as a result! In classroom after classroom, we saw children copying “words” from the blackboard incorrectly, for example, writing one syllable underneath the other; or, writing the *aksharas* in words from right to left (even though both Marathi and Kannada are written from left to right). Even their copying was poorly done! When we asked them about what they were writing, they usually were not able to tell us much. This shows that children were not thinking about, or understanding what they were writing.

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In a few classrooms in Wada, we saw teachers giving children “free writing” time — where they could write about whatever they wanted to. This was a nice change to see. In some of these classrooms, the teacher even had discussions with children—say, about a local festival that they had just celebrated—and then asked them to write about it. We were happy to observe such exercises. But, to our disappointment, once the children had written their pieces, the teacher either did not read what they had written carefully and give feedback; or, gave feedback only about spelling and handwriting. There was no feedback given to these young children about how to improve the quality of their writing in terms of ideas, organization, word-choice, voice or sentence fluency. This could be because the teachers were not aware that young children can be coached on these traits.

So, how exactly do we go about teaching children to write? We address this in detail in our next section, Recommendations for your classrooms. Before we go into what we can do in our classrooms, let us review classroom difficulties that we want to tackle.

To summarize, here are some of the issues we face with teaching children to write in Indian classrooms:

1. The focus is only on spelling, handwriting, and copy-writing “correctly”.
2. Even these are not taught well.
3. Most classrooms don’t provide space for children to write to express and communicate.
4. Even in the few classrooms where such opportunities are provided, feedback is absent, or restricted to the “conventions” trait.
5. Teachers have not been taught about the development of young children’s emergent writing, and are not made equipped to coach young children on the traits of writing.

Section VI

Recommendations  
for your  
classrooms

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## Section VI: Recommendations for your classrooms

It is clear that young children have many ideas and thoughts that they would communicate if given opportunities. Rather than thinking that their script knowledge has to be perfect in order to write, it will help if we encourage children to share their ideas and begin writing from an early age. What follows are classroom recommendations to begin the writing process with children.



**1. Think-Draw-Pretend-Read-Write:** Anne Dyson (1990), the noted American educator who spent a long time studying young children's writing recommends that we permit children to mix talking, drawing, gestures and pretend-play with their early writing attempts. We should create spaces where children can experiment freely with all these symbol systems.



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**2. Language Experience Approach:** The class could have a “shared” experience—say, a walk in the village, or a visit from a parent, or cooking together, or petting an animal. The class can then talk about this together and try to think about what part of the experience they would like to write. Children’s ideas can be pooled together, and the teacher can be the “note-taker”. The teacher can write down the children’s ideas, showing children that what they talk and think about together can be written down. The class can read the piece together and edit it. This can be hung up in the classroom and can be read and re-read over time. Even though children cannot yet “write correctly, they have already learned that writing is related to experiencing and thinking. With help from the teacher, they have participated in the “composing” process — thinking, drafting, revising, editing, and so on.

**3. MODEL the writing process:**

- o Use blank paper.
- o Sit with the whole class in a circle. Ask a question to the class and let each child answer it with a complete sentence. Example: Q: “What do you like to do when you get home from school?” Let everyone answer the question.
- o Create a set of questions like that (Who all live in your house? What is your favourite thing to eat? When you play, who do you like to play with, and what do you like to play? What are you really good at doing? What makes you really happy? What makes you really sad? etc.)
- o Spend some time discussing a few questions together. Then, use your discussions to start writing.
- o How do you choose a topic? Think aloud about each topic and why you decide to pick one topic over the other. What is specially interesting about this topic?
- o Think aloud about what you will include in the story. Choose a small part of the story to focus on, instead of the entire idea. For example, instead of writing about the village festival that happened recently, you could choose a small part of it—e.g., an interesting experience you had at the festival; or something new you ate; or your adventure with your cousin during the festival. Write the focus point down.
- o Show children how to “map” out the story in terms of beginning, middle and end. What happened first? What happened next? What happened at the end? In this way, children learn how to sequence events in a story and how to organize their thinking. After mapping, you can start writing.

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- o Show children how you would start to write. Think aloud. How will you set the scene and show the readers what is happening? Will you use one of the five senses to make the readers feel like they are there in your story? Will you describe the sights, sounds, smells, touch or taste of something? When you think aloud, you will make students aware of the thought processes involved in writing. Make notes on the board as you think.
  - o What interesting idea can you start with to get your reader engaged and so they understand what you are talking about? Write down a sentence with this idea on the board.
  - o What detail do you want to add to this? Write another sentence on the board with this detail. Continue in this way, until you reach the end.
  - o What should you say to end the story? Is it a surprise ending? Does it tie back to the focus point in some satisfying way? Show children how to end a story well.
  - o On another day, go back and read the piece together with the class. Revise it with their help. You could add dialogue. You could add interesting details. You could show children how to replace “boring” words with “interesting” words. Stop when the class is satisfied with the story.
  - o Encourage students to refer back to this story in their own writing attempts.

When you model the writing process, you help children understand how to write.

#### **4. Provide guided opportunities for young children to write:**

- o Beginning writers can draw and put a few letters next to their pictures. They can also draw to express themselves. They can tell the teacher about the story they have in their minds. The teacher can write this down next to their pictures. (This way children will see that their ideas are put into words that people can get to see!)
- o For children who want to write more, show them how to fold blank paper into BOOKLETS.
- o Put up a WORD LIST with common words on it that children may need in their writing. Allow children to copy words they need from this list.

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- o Encourage use of **INVENTED SPELLINGS**. This helps children to get comfortable with writing, and builds their knowledge of *akshara*-sound relationships.
  - o Assign **WRITING PARTNERS** by pairing children. Writing partners can help each other write words; listen to words as they read out their work and make suggestions.
  - o Make time to **SHARE** ideas/writing on a regular basis.
- 5. Link reading and writing:** Bring good children’s books to the class and read them aloud. Discuss how the writer has written the story to make it interesting to the readers. Show children techniques that writers use to begin the story, or to end it. Show them how writers use dialogue, or express feelings etc. in effective ways. Encourage children to start using some of these ideas in their own writing. This happens over a long period of time, and not in one lesson. If you regularly bring good books to class and discuss them with children, slowly, over time, you will see children begin to use these ideas in their own writing.
- 6. Provide meaningful feedback:** Here are some questions you can ask students as they present you with their writing. The point is to think through these questions aloud with students, with the aim that they will slowly become aware of the “traits of writing”:

**a. Ideas:**

- o Have I chosen a topic I really like?
- o Have I chosen a small part of a big idea?
- o Have I thought about what the reader will need to know?
- o Have I said something interesting about this idea?
- o Have I chosen interesting details to support my idea?



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**b. Organisation:**

- o Did I start my story in an interesting way?
- o Is there a sequence—beginning, middle, end—to my story?
- o Did I use sequence words like, “later”, “then”, “meanwhile”?
- o If my story is long, have I written in paragraphs?
- o Have I ended the story in a satisfying way?



**c. Voice:**

- o Does my writing convey any mood or feeling to the reader?
- o Can I use dialogue to show how different people in my story are feeling, or how they talk?



**d. Word Choice:**

- o Have I tried to use words without repeating myself?
- o Did I use interesting words?





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**e. Sentence fluency and grammar:**

- o Do I have clear sentences?
- o Do my sentences start in different ways?
- o Do my sentences have different lengths?
- o When I read my story aloud, does it sound like “real” language (or, does it sound artificial)?



Once these questions become a regular part of how we look at writing, and once we begin to see writing as a process that needs work and revision, it will become slowly easier for us as teachers to guide students and for students to work through their own writing with our help.

## Closing Comments

### Why is writing important?

We cannot afford to neglect writing instruction in our classrooms. Writing is of value to children because it allows them to express their emotions and thoughts. When children’s expression and thoughts are given importance in the classroom, children learn that their lives matter. It permits them to reflect on their experiences, and to communicate these experiences and thoughts to others. Learning to read and write is not just about learning some skills—it is about learning to think, and think well. Teaching writing in a way that enables good thinking should be a part of every early language and literacy curriculum.

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## **Why Teach Children to Write?**

We cannot afford to neglect writing instruction in our classrooms. Writing is of value to children because it allows them to express their emotions and thoughts. When children's expression and thoughts are given importance in the classroom, children learn that their lives matter. It permits them to reflect on their experiences, and to communicate these experiences and thoughts to others. Learning to read and write is not just about learning some skills — it is about learning to think, and think well. Teaching writing in a way that enables good thinking should be a part of every early language and literacy curriculum.

In this Teachers' Guide, we summarize learnings from the LiRiL project related to the teaching and learning of writing in classrooms in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

Teachers can prepare to teach writing effectively by understanding how children's writing begins and develops, and by examining what good writing is. In this book we give specific recommendations to put to use in your classrooms.

Happy reading and writing to you and your students!