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Our teaching of writing continues to evolve

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In this, our 30th Anniversary year, the teaching of writing continues to evolve as we search for new and improved resources and programs to equip our students with important skills for their future.

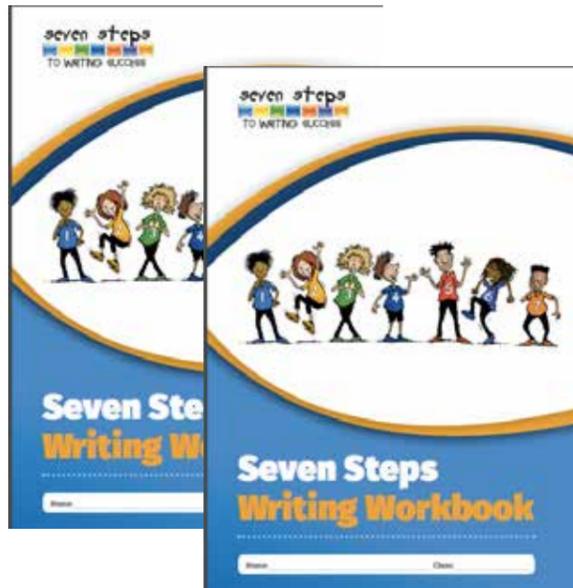
Currently, we are using a resource called *Seven Steps to Writing Success*, written by Jen McVeity. This program has seen outstanding results across the country and we are very excited to be using it comprehensively at Ormiston College. The seven building blocks to writing are actual tools that published authors learn. These tools are 'Plan for Success', 'Sizzling Starts', 'Show don't Tell', 'Tightening Tension', 'Dynamic Dialogue', 'Ban the Boring' and 'Exciting Endings'. This resource extends right through from Prep to Year 10, with all Junior School students and those in Years 7 and 9 English currently engaging with the program. Overall, it is proving to be immensely practical and inspiring for students and teachers alike.

One afternoon, rather than zooming home for a long weekend, I invited teachers Jan Hui, Victoria Peterman, Holly Photiou and Olivia Trask to join me, in order that we could reflect on the success of this resource in the school.

“HOW ARE YOU FINDING IT?”

JAN: “A fantastic resource. Highly inspiring for the students mainly because it starts with child friendly language describing the different sections of stories and then it is done from a very positive view. Rather than say ‘orientation’, it uses ‘Sizzling Start’, which is much more exciting and engaging for students. It hooks the students in.”

VICTORIA: “I like how it’s not genre specific. We can apply the principles to any form of writing.”



seven steps TO WRITING SUCCESS

JAN: "Tightening Tension sounds exciting and tells the beginning writer that this is going to be fun to do. The resource really does hook in those writers who are reluctant to have a go."

HOLLY: "Because we use it right through to Year 10, it provides us with a common language. When the students move up to the next year level, they immediately have a head start. They already know the terminology and it allows you to add and build on the concepts that the previous teacher taught them. You can extend them and build on their figurative language and descriptive vocabulary. You have a great basis to build on."

OLIVIA: "Yes, we're scaffolding each year, broadening their understanding of what writing means, building and developing their ability to write. I like how Seven Steps allows for so much creativity. 'Ban the Boring' is an important principle here. We learn the value of combining ideas in threes like 'want to go home. I want to be in my bed. I just want to read my book!' It's a strong writing tool."

HOLLY: "Instead of writing 'Firstly..., Secondly... and Finally...' we are expanding our ideas. Now, we may teach the students how a rhetorical question is an engaging way to begin a paragraph in a persuasive text. The students are encouraged to be creative and colourful."

JAN: "The fact that the resource encourages verbal communication and stresses the role of talk and discussion is important. In the support materials we get as teachers, the author explains that good writing is 85% talking. Oral vocabulary is vital to the writing process. We brainstorm, we plan using the framework and we expand on our ideas."

"WHAT DO THE STUDENTS LIKE BEST?"

OLIVIA: "The most popular is the 'Sizzling Starts' because they can play with onomatopoeia like BANG, POW, BOOM!"

HOLLY: "Dynamic Dialogue!"

VICTORIA: "I think all of the steps really because there are lots of hands-on activities to support teaching these 'chunks' or parts of a written piece that engage the students. This resource supports teaching these seven building blocks in chunks, just like tennis where you learn how to hold the racquet, then how to do a forehand, then you continue to learn all the other shots until eventually, you get to play a game."

JAN: "That is how we teach writing. It starts in the early years and we build on the learning each year. We teach the chunks or seven basic tools for writing and when the students have developed enough of an understanding for their age and personal ability, only then we ask them to put it all down on paper to create a wonderful text. Then when we edit, we focus on a chunk rather than the whole story. We pick out a chunk in their story like 'Dynamic Writing' ability and facility with the English language."

OLIVIA: "We use the story graph and they can see how a story travels. We look at stories from published authors and match the parts of that work to the graph. They become really excited when they can see how the graph matches what we might be reading as a class novel for example. When you point out dynamic dialogue, 'Can we try that, can we try that?' and they give it a go! Even if it is difficult for their age group, they do give it a go."

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HAVE YOU EVER TRIED PAPER FIGHTS IN CLASS?

OLIVIA: "Paper fights were really fun. That is where two students will sit together and write the words they want to say out loud when they are having a verbal fight over some issue. There is no talking allowed, only writing. Of course, there are rules attached but it is a lot of fun and an activity that teaches them how to make dialogue engaging for the reader. It also teaches them that characters have to have a recognisable voice in the story."

HOLLY: "I think 'Show Don't Tell' is probably the hardest one to teach because of vocabulary, however, once the students 'get it', it has the biggest impact on their writing. When they can do it well, it IS phenomenal how it changes their writing."

VICTORIA: "We tie in our novel study with the Seven Steps. Charlotte's Web has lots of 'Show Don't Tell' in it. E.B. White really gets it. We will focus on a particular scene in the story and the students can transfer that understanding to their writing with some support from me."

DO YOU FIND HAVING THE VISUAL DISPLAYS IN THE CLASSROOMS HELPS?

HOLLY: "Yes! It makes for a common visual language as well."

JAN: "Because then, students can hook into the story graph, for example. They can see that you start with the hook then go to the backfill then the conflict/resolution with rising tension and then the exciting ending. They can see how the seven steps fit in, where they can use them in the story or the persuasive writing."

OLIVIA: "Often we will co-write a piece then we will break it up and put it on the graph like labels to show where everything belongs. That really works. They find it much easier to visualise when they have to write independently. Sometimes, we will cut up the parts to the story and the students will have to put them together like a jigsaw. That activity really helps them to identify the chunks and how they go together to make a story or persuasive text."

JAN: "I use an excitement line - Down the bottom is me asleep and up the top are fireworks. They see that when you are tightening tension, we have to reach the firework end. The visual display helps the visual learners."

SO OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE SEVEN STEPS AS A RESOURCE?

JAN: "Awesome."

VICTORIA: "It is our main writing tool. The workbooks that come as part of the whole package are really useful. They are full of great ideas. We are going to share all our ideas in a One Note document for the whole school this year. Peter Hoens (Head of Department, English and Drama) arranged training in the Seven Steps to all Secondary School English teachers in 2017 and at the beginning of this year; Peta Egan (also from the Secondary School) ran a workshop for the Prep to Year 6 staff on the pupil free days, which was fantastic. Peta, along with Amanda Bowker, set up the One Note for us to share ideas consistently across the College. It is a very positive step."

Having the opportunity to share the views of these teachers is invaluable. Ormiston College has covered a lot of ground during its teaching of writing over the past 30 years. It is exciting and satisfying to know that the resources purchased by the school are being used consistently across those formative years to inspire children to write imaginatively, passionately and persuasively. ■

