

# Creativity can be taught

Writing is a fundamental skill for any student. But how can students engage more effectively with content and develop strategies to improve originality? *The Educator* spoke to award-winning author **Jen McVeity** to find out

**EVERY CHILD** has an imagination. Yet there's a common misconception that creativity is bestowed upon the lucky few. Collectively, this myth needs to be banished – creativity is an essential skill for the current generation of learners, and schools can teach it as they would maths, science or PE. The writing classroom is the perfect place to start, says Jen McVeity, author and creator of Seven Steps to Writing Success.

“Creativity can – and should – be taught and practised just like any other skill,” McVeity says. “Ask any author: the more you write, the more easily the ideas flow.”

## How to generate ideas

Big ideas create exceptional writing. McVeity maintains that there are three key strategies to enhance students' creativity and originality:

- Brainstorming: a form of imaginative research
- Visual clustering around a central idea, or mind mapping
- Asking questions

To help teachers apply these strategies, McVeity created Seven Steps to Writing Success, which breaks down writing into individual steps to ensure students are not overwhelmed by writing an entire piece at once. It's a teaching and learning resource hailed as “the building blocks to great writing”, which is not only lifting students' literacy engagement but has been shown to



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raise NAPLAN data by one to three levels within a single year.

The program supports the assertion that investing in teachers is the best way to improve student achievement. It's been demonstrated by countries such as Finland, where teacher training and support is paramount, and as a result, student outcomes are high. Teachers from more than 2,500 schools

around Australia are part of the Seven Steps community, and many are seeing an immediate improvement in student writing results and engagement.

The program's Seven Steps are:

- **Step 1:** Plan for Success
- **Step 2:** Sizzling Starts
- **Step 3:** Tightening Tension
- **Step 4:** Dynamic Dialogue
- **Step 5:** Show, Don't Tell
- **Step 6:** Ban the Boring
- **Step 7:** Exciting Endings

“It is Step 1, Plan for Success, that holds the key to creativity, focusing on brainstorming,” McVeity says. “It is the thinking before writing and brainstorming which are the most powerful tools of creativity. Students learn to dig deeper, to find unique ideas and powerful arguments so their writing can stand out and excel. The more students brainstorm, the more easily their ideas flow.”

Similarly, free-flowing visuals such as mind mapping provide a pathway to original and complex writing structures and allow

students to select their best ideas. This approach often produces different concepts that students might not have initially considered, stretching their imaginations.

Finally, asking probing questions about structure or characters – “What if the fish can talk?” – encourages students to further explore and develop their writing beyond obvious and simple ideas.



### Alpha versus beta brainwaves

Typically, throughout the day, most people function in beta brainwave mode – fast, oscillating waves responsible for logical thinking. Beta brainwaves help us navigate a car, calculate maths problems or crunch spreadsheets.

Alpha brainwaves are slower and higher in amplitude – these are the ones that allow us to be creative. Meditation, daydreaming, brainstorming ideas and asking “what if ...” are all products of the alpha state.

“Getting into the alpha state and gener-

### ABOUT SEVEN STEPS



Seven Steps to Writing Success is a writing program that empowers teachers to inspire their students to rapidly improve their writing skills and, most importantly, learn to love writing. Developed by award-winning Australian author Jen McVeity and using both author- and curriculum-based techniques, it develops skills and strengths in students that are crucial for five domains of a holistic learner: personal learning, interpersonal learning, thinking processes, communication and English language, and literature and literacy.

“The concepts of the Seven Steps apply to all forms of writing – narrative, persuasive and informative – and we give practical examples of how to apply the concepts to each text type,” McVeity says.

# WRITING

ating ideas takes time, and sadly, we often don't respect that time," McVeity says. "Most authors spend at least a third of their time coming up with ideas. Yet how many of us teach brainstorming and give students time to practise and master the skill?"

Students need to regularly practise using these planning techniques to allow time for reflection, deep thinking and creative flow. This is particularly apparent during NAPLAN, when students are given five minutes to plan their writing and often struggle to think of original ideas in such a short timeframe.

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Importantly, creative writing is not only relevant to fiction; it also includes persuasive and informative writing. Seven Steps provides training and resources for each of these writing styles. This aims to banish formulaic writing, particularly the “persuasive formula”, which flattens out students’ writing and makes the work of a gifted Year 9 student sound exactly the same as a Year 3 student.

### **Creativity breeds engagement**

Research has shown that the average teenager or adult can only listen with focus for approximately 20 minutes at a time. Therefore, placing the teacher at the front of the class, instructing for long periods, means lower retention rates and less engagement than a collaborative classroom.

“Kids are creative in different ways, so it is

important to teach creativity in an engaging way,” McVeity says. “Injecting the fun into writing lessons encourages creativity and has a profound impact on student confidence in their imagination and writing skills.”

Only after students have mastered the basic techniques of writing do they put it all together to tackle the task of writing a whole narrative, persuasive or informative piece.

The second strategy for engagement is the emphasis on collaborative learning within a Seven Steps classroom. Talk is a vital scaffold for writing for all students. It is the first step in literacy and is also important

for beginning writers and students with learning difficulties or from EAL backgrounds. Sharing, interacting and peer feedback are crucial tools that can be used to develop writing skills.

“People often regard writing as a quiet, solo activity, intense and full of concentration,” McVeity says. “It doesn't have to be this way.”

Before and after each short writing task, students work in groups. Beforehand, they might brainstorm ideas, explore planning options, research evidence and ask questions of each other, much like teams of TV script writers do.

“After writing, students share their work with others, get feedback from their audience, learn how other students have tackled the piece and make notes for their own improvement,” McVeity says.

## **BOOSTING LITERACY FOR 1 MILLION+ STUDENTS**




In creating the Seven Steps to Writing Success program, Jen McVeity has helped raise the literacy levels of more than a

million children. Aggregate data of 1,700 students in F-9 shows a 10% increase in writing skills on the NAPLAN band in just 10 weeks. The program has also been shown to improve student engagement within a matter of weeks. In addition, McVeity says that principals are often amazed at the “self-sustaining power” of collaboration.

“Students are engaged; they often say, ‘Yay, we’ve got writing now!’ However, the power also comes from feedback and results,” McVeity says. “Teachers can see a rapid rise in students’ literacy skills, and this is exciting for teachers as well as for the student.”

Seven Steps has generated many success stories by eliminating the fear students often feel when asked to think creatively. One example is Grange Primary School, which greatly improved its writing program after introducing the Seven Steps. Year 3 teacher Georgie Medhurst says, “Reluctant writers saw how fun writing could be. My students’ writing has completely transformed.”

Seven Steps teachers say their students are now engaged, and their classrooms are collaborative, vibrant and interactive environments that champion creativity in all aspects of literacy: speaking, writing, reading and listening. Is this happening in your classroom? 

For more information on **Seven Steps to Writing Success**, visit [sevenstepswriting.com](http://sevenstepswriting.com). You can also follow Seven Steps on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Pinterest.



seven steps



TO WRITING SUCCESS



Imagine a vibrant writing classroom full of ideas, laughter and energy. Students are engaged and contributing; writing with passion and sharing with excitement.

**That's what a Seven Steps classroom looks like.**

**Australia's largest and most engaging educator of writing literacy**



Teachers from over 3,000 schools trained



improvement in writing scores in just 10 weeks



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