

TEACHING TO WRITE THE RIGHT WAY

Jen McVeity talks about her passion for writing and her literacy program aimed at instilling the same passion in students

The Educator: Before becoming a full-time writer, you amassed a wealth of diverse work experience, from ski instructing to journalism. Can you provide more insight into your life and career before writing?

Jen McVeity: As a 20-year-old, I was a rock climber, scuba diver and mad passionate skier. I became a ski instructor, worked five seasons in Europe and somehow managed to get uni and teaching degrees, too. Sport has always been a big part of my family's life, from circus trapeze to hiking to beach volleyball, [which] I still play several nights a week and a month in California each year.

The glory of match day or performance day is thrilling. But the important lesson sports taught me is that before you can become accomplished at something, you need to start by learning lots of smaller skills first. You need to practise over and over – and over! – again before your muscles do it naturally and confidently. I took these concepts used all the time in sports – chunking and practise, practise, practise – to create the core teaching principles behind the Seven Steps to Writing Success.

TE: Were there any salient lessons you learned during that time that you believe have been of significant benefit to you as a writer?

JM: Writing is not actually about vocabulary or spelling or grammar – it is, above all, the passion to communicate. Writers step back and look at events, then try to put experiences

onto paper without being self-indulgent.

I once taught the worst lesson of my life. It just so happened that a supervisor from the teaching college was assessing me on it, too. I survived the lesson – just. Afterwards, I wrote up the experience with a humorous slant. The assessor passed me for 'resilience' – basically for not screaming and running away. And the article I wrote got published in *Idiom*, the English journal for secondary teachers. That was the start of my publishing career.

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This passion to communicate is also what led me to create the Seven Steps. After writing over 20 books and presenting around the world to aspiring authors, I realised that all the concepts I was teaching to adults worked perfectly for kids as well.

TE: What do you consider your standout achievements as a writer?

JM: Developing the Seven Steps and watching how it makes a real difference in kids' confidence and belief in themselves.

My original goal for Seven Steps was to

have a positive impact on 1 million kids. Strong communicators get better jobs, have more positive relationships, negotiate the world more confidently – I wanted a million kids to grow up with this power to write. As we are training over 6,000 teachers a year now, I'm pretty certain we have smashed that goal.

TE: What kind of teaching approach do you believe gives educators the best chance at creating students

who are adept at and passionate about writing?

JM: Every teacher knows this: If you aren't engaging as a teacher, if you don't know your subject matter, if you don't respect and enjoy being with students, then very little learning will happen.

After that, I think it's pretty simple. You can't say to kids on day one, "Here's the topic. Write me a story." That's just too daunting, whether you're 10 or 100.

The individual components of writing are what we need to teach explicitly. For instance,



PROFILE

Name: Jen McVeity

Company: Seven Steps to Writing Success

Title: CEO

Based in: Melbourne

Fast fact: McVeity has authored more than 20 books and been a keynote speaker at 50 conferences across Australia, Asia and the US

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‘Step 2: Sizzling Starts’ shows how a movie or book always starts with a moment of change to grab the reader’s attention. Compare this to the thousands of students throughout Australia all starting their weekend recount with, “On the weekend ...” The authorial technique behind Sizzling Starts means students would write something far more engaging, like, “There’s sand in my eyes and sunburn on my back. Whose

idea was it to go to the beach?”

Students who are taught the Seven Steps practise with short, sharp, achievable writing tasks every day. It may be only 20 minutes a day, but the more you do it, the easier it gets.

This is especially important for those students who are not confident writers. These successes build confidence. And confidence can lead to major change when students face the pressure of a test or want to use words in

a powerful and inspiring manner.

TE: What is the greatest challenge teachers face when teaching writing?

JM: Some people suggest that the curriculum kills creativity by proposing rigid models – the persuasive writing formula is a particular killer. But these quick-fix formulae are not actually celebrated in the Australian curriculum or in NAPLAN. Instead, the curriculum aims to stretch students to become capable writers, then creative writers.

I also worry that some teachers, with the best of intentions, think they can improve writing by primarily concentrating on spelling and grammar. These are the secretarial elements of writing and should come well after the creation part of writing. First you create, then you edit. You don’t start with the secretarial side.

TE: As an author, people probably just assume you were born creative. Can creativity be taught?

JM: There is a misconception that creativity is reserved for the special few, the gifted, the artistic. But creativity is not a gene that you are born with, like green eyes or black hair.

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

Creativity should not be limited to just narrative writing, either. Informative and persuasive writing is so much stronger when the writer creatively presents their information or argument. Think of David Attenborough’s *Planet Earth* – he grabs viewers by turning facts about animals into exciting, engaging, tension-filled stories that you can’t turn off.

TE: You also emphasise the importance of brainstorming. Do you think the development of this skill is often overlooked in the classroom?

JM: Brainstorming, either in a group or alone, is one of the most powerful tools of creativity. Generating ideas takes time, and sadly, we often don’t respect that time. There

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is a tendency in classrooms to want to produce written work as proof that students are learning.

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?

TE: You're an advocate of collaborative writing classrooms. Why is that?

JM: People often regard writing as a quiet, solo activity, intense and full of concentration. It doesn't have to be this way. Collaborative classrooms are vibrant, interactive and include speaking, writing, reading and listening – all four aspects of literacy.

Research has shown that when students work collaboratively, they learn more, retain more and have a far more positive attitude towards learning. Most importantly, they have fun.

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TE: Can you talk about the kinds of results the implementation of Seven Steps in schools has achieved? Are there any particular success stories that stand out, given the extent of the impact on a specific student?

JM: So many stories are shared with us – it's hard to choose one.

There's Rasmussen State School in Northern Queensland, which had a high population of at-risk students with NAPLAN writing scores below the minimum national standard. Their principal told us the “students simply were not engaged, they [had a] lack of confidence and lack of will”. So, she brought in the Seven Steps. Since then, the school has

transformed from one of the lowest-performing schools in Queensland to significantly outperforming the state in writing improvement for the last two years.

We all know that it is sometimes hard to motivate students, particularly teenagers, but that's what Carly, an amazing Year 7 teacher from a high school in Gosford, did. She not only got her students loving to write, but she found a whole new energy in her class. She told us, “I surveyed the students before the program, and most students said they were not good writers. Now they all have confidence and believe they are great at writing. My lowest student, who would not write a sentence at the beginning of the year, is on the 12th chapter of his novel!”

And then there is the story a lovely principal shared about a boy who got sent to her office quite often for misbehaviour. She would sit him in a quiet corner of her office

and let him calm down. One day he turned up to her office at lunchtime. She asked him, “Matty, what's happened now?” He just shook his head. “Nothing, Miss, I just want to get my story written, and I need a quiet place to do it!”

Can you imagine what it's like to go to work every morning and read emails or get calls from teachers telling you how engaged their students are and how amazing their writing has become? That's what every person in the Seven Steps office gets every week. Some people go to work and sell soap or sandwiches. We get to create a legacy. We share a way to help students learn to love writing and find the power that literacy brings. 📖

SEVEN STEPS BY THE NUMBERS



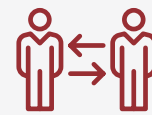
2005

Year the Seven Steps program was established



6,000

Number of teachers the program trains via face-to-face training in Australia each year



8,000+

Number of teachers who are part of the Seven Steps online community



1.35m

Number of Australian students who have been taught the Seven Steps



70%

Percentage of students for which the program has been shown to raise writing scores by one or more NAPLAN bands in one school term