

Cooking Up a Piece of Writing



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How is cooking a meal similar to writing an essay?

It is the end product of a process that while simple to some, is difficult for others. Whipping up a meal may be easy for my mother, but I would burn down the kitchen before trying to deep-fry some tempura. The difference boils down to experience and knowledge. Likewise, for our students, the ability to produce a successful piece of writing comes from experience and knowledge.

Let's touch on the knowledge aspect of writing. Before typing furiously away on the keyboard or scribbling letter after letter on paper, a writer needs to be aware of the purpose, the audience, and the context of the writing piece. These are the same considerations one would have when cooking a meal. Is it to celebrate a particular event, or to fill empty stomachs? What preferences and food allergies do the recipients have? Is it for an elaborate dinner or a simple lunch? An instructional manual would not be sprinkled with long, flowery descriptions of each step, nor the author's thoughts and emotions regarding them. It would be clear and concise. Students often only write to be assessed, and hence their purpose, audience and context may end up addressing the teacher, rather than what was intended based on the scenario given. This leads to students associating writing with assessment, potentially snuffing out any passion for writing that they may have had.

Once the writer has considered the purpose, audience, and context of a piece of writing, the next step would be to keep in mind the six qualities of writing: *conventions*, *fluency*, *ideas*, *organisation*, *word choice*, and *voice*. Simply put,

- ◆ **conventions** are about spelling, punctuation and grammar,
- ◆ **fluency** is about the ease of reading,
- ◆ **ideas** are about the writer's knowledge on a given topic,
- ◆ **organisation** is about the logical sequence and text structure,
- ◆ **word choice** is about using topic-specific vocabulary, and
- ◆ **voice** is about the writer's attitude and perspective on the topic.



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Without a doubt, a successful piece of writing would excel in each quality. We can think of *ideas* and *organisation* as the recipe, *conventions*, *fluency*, and *word choice* as the ingredients, and *voice* as the uniqueness of a meal.

When these six qualities come together in harmony, a successful piece of writing is born. These are the six qualities that Educational Therapists at DAS use to assess our students' writing progress, which helps us tailor our instruction to suit their needs.

Having knowledge of what is required for a successful piece of writing is not enough, unfortunately. I can read all the cookbooks in the world, but if I don't try out the recipes, I'm not going to be a good cook. That's where experience comes in. Practice makes perfect. But before we subject our students or children to essay practice after essay practice, we need to consider if they are practising in the right manner. It is often said, 'Don't study hard, study smart.' If they know what makes a good piece of writing, what writing quality they struggle in, they can focus on those areas.

How do we help these budding writers in their writing journey? We can make writing practices less 'dry' by giving them real opportunities to write to others, rather than for assessment. Such authentic activities could include writing:

- ◆ a letter to the newspaper stating their opinion,
- ◆ an e-mail to a shop requesting for more information regarding a product, or
- ◆ a short story that will be printed and shared among family and friends.

These are just some examples. Cultivating a love for writing when they are young goes a long way in helping them shape their attitude towards writing.

Just like cooking a meal, writing is a complex process that requires knowledge and experience to achieve a desirable result. Mastering that process takes time, but with the right instruction, we can all get closer to becoming a better writer, or deep-frying that tempura till crisp and golden brown, instead of the kitchen.

