LEARNING TO WRITE
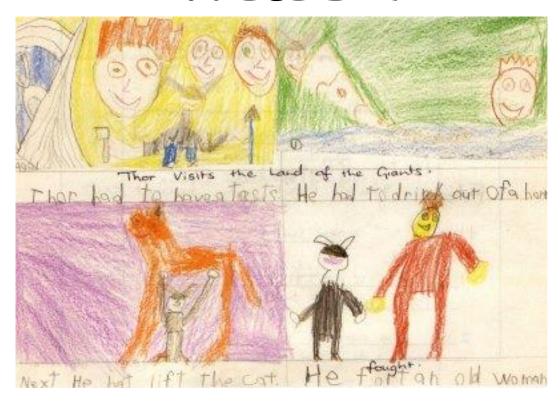

CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

AQA Assessment Objectives – Children's Language Development

What the AQA A Level English Language Specification says:	What this means you have to include in your answers
AO1: Apply appropriate methods of language analysis, using associated terminology and coherent written expression (15 marks)	• Write your analysis and essays clearly and accurately. • Make sure you use correct linguistic terminology to define the features of language you are discussing.
AO2: Demonstrate critical understanding of concepts and issues relevant to language use (15 marks)	• Show you can apply your understanding of linguistic theories of acquisition to your analysis of the given data set(s) including theorists' names.

For Children's Language Development (ages 0-11 years) you will need to:

Know . . .	Be able to . . .
The principle milestones in linguistic development, in terms of: • Pragmatics / Language functions • Phonetics • Lexis / Semantics • Syntax / Morphology.	Describe and analyse examples of child language data precisely and accurately, using the appropriate framework and terminology.
The issues surrounding the question of 'stages' of language development.	Analyse data with an open mind.
The principle theories that attempt to explain the process of acquisition, i.e. Behaviourist, Innateness, Cognitive, Social.	Relate your analysis of specific examples of child language to these theories, and explain how they might explain the linguistic data you are presented with.
The relationship between spoken and written language and how this helps to explain the process of learning to read and write.	Comment precisely and in an informed way on data relating to children's early reading and writing (literacy skills).

FUNCTIONS OF WRITING

Writing has the following **five functions**; children have to learn the functions of writing as well as the actual process of writing.

1. **Practical**
   Most of us make lists, jot down reminders, write notes and instructions.

2. **Job related**
   Professional and white collar workers write frequently.

3. **Stimulating**
   Writing helps to provoke thoughts and organise them logically and concisely.

4. **Social**
   Most of us write thank-you notes, invitations and letters to friends occasionally (although this may now be via email/text/social media).

5. **Therapeutic**
   It can be helpful to express feelings in writing that cannot be expressed so easily by speaking.

FEATURES OF THE ENGLISH WRITING SYSTEM

- Holding and controlling the pen.
- Direction of writing – writing goes from left to right.
- Alignment of writing – writing goes along a straight line.
- Using upper and lower case.
- Spacing words appropriately on the line/page.
- Understanding and applying principles of sentence construction.
- Understanding and applying the conventions of punctuation.
- Letter direction – many letters face in a particular direction, e.g. 'b' and 'd' as well as 's'.
- Selecting appropriate words and using appropriate graphemic combinations to spell them.
- Later, learning to produce cursive (joined-up) script.
- Learning and using forms and conventions for genres of writing e.g. letters, stories.
- Using the skills of reassessing to monitor and correct the writing as necessary.

STAGES OF CHILDREN'S WRITING

- Learning to write is much more than a motor skill. It can be studied in conjunction with children's emerging cognitive, social and linguistic abilities.
- Being able to write enables children to formulate thoughts and reflect on meaning – it is part of the **process** of learning.
- In addition to motor ability and functional awareness, children need to develop the structures of language appropriately.
- In the early stages of learning to write and read, young children compose before they know much about the conventions of writing and reading or have the skill to control a pencil or crayon or form letters.
- Children in pre-school often write and read in unconventional forms: scribblings, drawings, letter-like marks. These are not mistakes. Young children are encouraged to 'write' without worrying about the mechanics of writing.

Kroll (1981) – recognised 4 stages of development:

1. **Preparatory stage** **(approx. 4-7)**
   Basic motor skills develop and principles of the spelling system acquired.

2. **Consolidation stage** **(approx. 7-9)**
   Children begin to use writing to express what they can already say in speech. Writing closely reflects the patterns of spoken language. There may be colloquialisms, strings of clauses linked by "and", unfinished sentences.

3. **Differentiation stage** **(9-10)**
   Writing begins to diverge from speech and develops its own patterns and organisation. Errors are common at first, as children learn new standards and experiment with new structures found in their reading. Their written work becomes fuller and more diverse as they encounter the need to produce different kinds of writing for different audiences and purposes.

   At this point children need guidance about the structures and functions of written language. They realise that writing is a medium where there is time to reflect, re-think and to use language as a way of shaping thought. They therefore begin to draft/revise/edit.

4. **Integration stage** **(11+)**
   Writers have such a good command of language that they can vary their stylistic choices at will and develop a personal 'voice'. This continues to develop throughout adult life.

   Note that for the AQA specification, you only need to look at children's language development up to 11 years old.

Dr Kathy Barclay has identified seven stages of children's writing (1996):

1. The first stage is **SCRIBBLING.**
   These are random marks on a page. To encourage children at this stage, adults can offer blank paper and writing tools and talk with children about their writing.

2. The second stage is **MOCK HANDWRITING**.
   This often appears with drawings. Children produce lines of wavy scribbles. This stage resembles cursive writing and may be revisited at a later time.

3. The third stage is **MOCK LETTERS**.
   Children make letter-like shapes that resemble conventional alphabet letters.

4. The next stage is **CONVENTIONAL LETTERS**.
   The first word to appear is usually the child's first name. Adults will often see a string of letters across a page that a child reads as a sentence.

5. This is known as the **INVENTED SPELLING** stage.
   As the child writes conventional letters, they begin to cluster letters to make words. Although the words may not appear conventional, children will often ask an adult, "What did I write?"

6. Stage six is the **APPROXIMATED OR PHONETIC SPELLING** stage.
   Children begin to associate sounds with the letters.

7. The last stage of writing is the **CONVENTIONAL SPELLING** stage.
   This occurs as the child's approximated spellings become more and more conventional.

CHILDREN'S WRITING

STAGE	DESCRIPTION	ANALYSIS
1. Drawing & sign writing	- Children often experiment with a kind of sign writing which they regard as being different from drawing. - Beginning to understand that we use marks on the page to pass on ideas from writers to readers. - Signs show some characteristics of writing on the page, such as a succession of characters in a line.	The first breakthrough comes when children learn to recognise that there is a difference between **drawing** and **writing** - between shapes & signs. They grasp that writing (in English) is distributed along straight **lines** and that **direction** (from left to right) matters. They learn that the **distribution of blank space** is also important.
2. Letter-like forms	Individual signs produced have some letter-like features.	Children start to recognise the different **shapes** for the alphabet & copy these. This is a difficult task ∵ of the number of different upper & lower case letters & importance of minute distinctions relating to their relative size, orientation & position in relation to the line. They learn to associate these with different sounds or names. A second difficulty arises from the fact that the same letters in English can represent **different sounds** in different contexts
3. Copied letters	Child is able to overwrite, underwrite or copy letters sufficiently accurately for them to be recognised.	
4. Child's name & strings of letters	Child independently writes strings of letters, usually including their own name.	Children start to recognise that **groups of letters** tend to occur together. Many first learn this in connection with their own name. Usually, they learn it as a sight-word without at first being able to analyse it into letter components. They also begin to recognise that other words they come across frequently have the same strings of letters at the beginning and at the end.

STAGE	DESCRIPTION	ANALYSIS
5. Words	• Children learn that the sounds associated with groups of letters represent familiar spoken words. • Understanding of the principles underlying the use of the alphabet.	Breakthrough to literacy comes when the child learns to associate the sounds linked to groups of letters with **spoken words** they know. They have understood the **alphabetic principle** - that we can approximately represent the sounds of words using letters. When children reach stage 5, the threshold to literacy has been crossed.
6. Sentences	• Children have learnt to write confidently. • Can begin to express ideas in writing that link several concepts. • Need to use clause or sentence to do this. • Do this without using capital letters and full stops systematically.	Children have to learn the conventions we use to show how **groups of words** are linked together into sentences; but the systematic use of grammatical punctuation, including full stops & a capital letter to start a sentence is something that almost always occurs after children have begun to write texts fluently.
7. Text	• Writing texts involves combining clauses or sentences to express related ideas.	Children learn to combine clauses & sentences into texts to convey a **sequence of related ideas**. Texts are defined as writing involving a series of related sentences. Texts are **coherent** in meaning and **cohesive** in structure - not just a list of unconnected sentences.

http://revisionworld.com/a2-level-level-revision/english-language/child-language-acquisition/learning-write

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF SPELLING

There are several different but parallel systems that break down the developmental stages of spelling into understandable categories. This one uses four stages although there are perfectly good systems divided into six and eight categories.

Stage One: Exploration

- Pre-letter writing.
- Random writing on page -letters, symbols, numbers.
- May use repetition of familiar letters such as the letters in child's name.
- Uses left-to-right directionality.
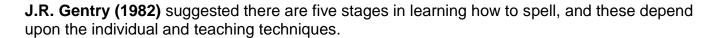- Uses random sight words.

Stage Two: Semi-phonetic

- Leaves random spaces in writing.
- Uses a few known words in correct place - i.e. names.
- Shows letter-sound correspondence.
    - uses initial consonants.
    - uses partial mapping of word (2 or 3 letters).

Stage Three: Phonetic

- Total mapping of letter-sound correspondence.
- Vowels are omitted when not heard.
- Writes quickly.
- Spaces words correctly.
- Letters are assigned strictly on the basis of sound br=bar or prt=party.

Stage Four: Transitional

- Vowels appear in every syllable.
- Silent "e" pattern becomes fixed.
- Inflectional endings like "s", "ing" are used.
- Common letter sequences are used (ay, ee, ow).
- Child moves toward visual spelling.
- May include all, but reverse some, letters (from=form).

J.R. Gentry (1982) suggested there are five stages in learning how to spell, and these depend upon the individual and teaching techniques.

1. **Pre-communicative stage**: The child realises that symbols can be used to create a message and have meanings. They may, however, invent symbols.
2. **Semi-phonetic stage**: The child begins to realise that letters "have" sounds. In writing, they may abbreviate words and use pictures for words they don't know.
3. **Phonetic stage**: The child spells through sound-symbol correspondence. They may not be aware that some strings of letters aren't acceptable in English.

4. **Transitional stage**: The child uses the basic conventions of the English language system. They start to become aware of the patterns in spelling that extend further than using just phonetic spellings.
5. **"Correct" stage**: The child now understands the basic spelling patterns and knows something about word structures, using visual strategies to spell. They have a large automatic spelling vocabulary and can distinguish between homonyms and homophones. They also have control over 'loaded language' (language that attempts to evoke the emotions) and Latinate lexis.

What can go wrong with spelling?

At a young age, children may **placehold**, which means to use some of the letters, usually the consonants, to represent the word: such as *bcs* for *because*. It's often done because the child is unsure of the spelling.

Though poor spellers with a **weak visual memory** might have a fairly clear idea of which symbol represents which sound, they don't remember what words look like and get confused when writing them down.

Poor spellers with **weak auditory memories** have problems understanding which symbols represent which sounds, and can't hear individual sounds in words. They make random guesses at spellings and are often poor spellers as well.

Some spelling errors might include:

- getting the initial letter wrong - this suggests the child isn't ready to write, and is a serious problem if the child is older than seven
- using phonetic alternatives - a common error. There are two types of phonetic alternatives:
    1. a form of spelling is chosen that follows a pattern from another word, but is wrong in the context of the word, such as *ne<u>ss</u>essary* as in *le<u>ss</u>on*; or a child not realising it is a soft c sound in *ne<u>c</u>essary* (like at the start of <u>*ceiling*</u>)
    2. a form of spelling is chosen that isn't possible in English, like *perfi<u>kt</u>*. This is a more serious error.
- problems with prefixes and suffixes before children understand how words are put together, such as in *di<u>s</u>sappear* and *mi<u>s</u>pelt,* and *mak<u>e</u>ing; ance/ence* are frequently confused as they sound the same
- misspelling unstressed vowels, a far more common mistake than stressed vowels,
- dropping consonants where they aren't stressed in speech, such as *ofen* and *chrismas*
- misspelling words that include double or single letters e.g. *wonderful<u>l</u>.*

Of course, errors might not always be formed through misspelling. If a child produces something on a computer, it may just be a typo!

A Framework for Writing about Children's Writing

In your introduction you should describe the text overall that you have been given as data in the exam, paying attention to **pragmatics** and **discourse**:

❑ Pragmatics – what is the context of the text – how much can you work out and how much cannot be known? Who is the child writing for? Is the text determined by a teacher, and does it show evidence of being guided?

❑ Decide on the genre of the text, e.g. narrative, report.

❑ Discourse – look at the overall structure of the text, if it's a narrative or a report, how are the ideas organised? How cohesive is the text (how well 'stuck together' is it)? Are discourse markers used?

Consider the **lexis** of the text:

❑ How appropriate is the register?

❑ Is any of the text similar to speech?

❑ Is any of the lexis field-specific? Perhaps the child has prepared for this topic by reading about it.

❑ Are conjunctions used?

❑ Is there description? What kind? E.g. adjectives, adverbs, explanatory clauses etc.

Consider the **grammar** of the text:

❑ What sentence types are there?

❑ Are sentence boundaries appropriate?

❑ How well is punctuation used?

❑ What tenses are used in the text? Are they used correctly or does the child change tense at the wrong time?

❑ Is speech reproduced correctly?

❑ Are passives used as well as actives?

Consider the **graphological** features of the text:

❑ Directionality of writing (left-right, top-bottom).

❑ Overall spatial organisation, e.g. are there images included with the text? Are there headings if this is an information text, or a title? Consider how closely this matches the appearance of standard texts in the chosen genre.

❑ Size of letters – is it consistent?

❑ Use of upper and lower case letters.

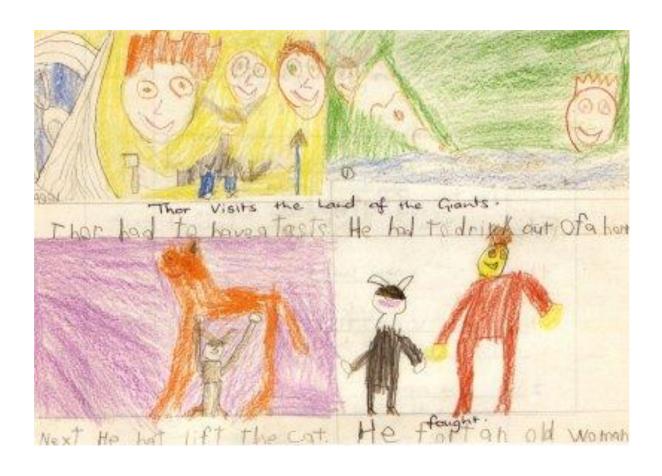❑ Reversal of letters – d and b, for example.

❑ Joined up letters.

Consider the **spelling** of the text:

❑ Use the terminology you have learned to describe the spelling choices made by the writer – in particular, you need to consider how phonetic the spellings are (missing out the schwa, deleting the less stressed syllables), how much whole-word knowledge the writer has and how the 'virtuous errors' reveal basic understanding of spelling rules.

❑ Remember to take into account the type of words which the child is trying to spell: are they high frequency words or are they more unusual?
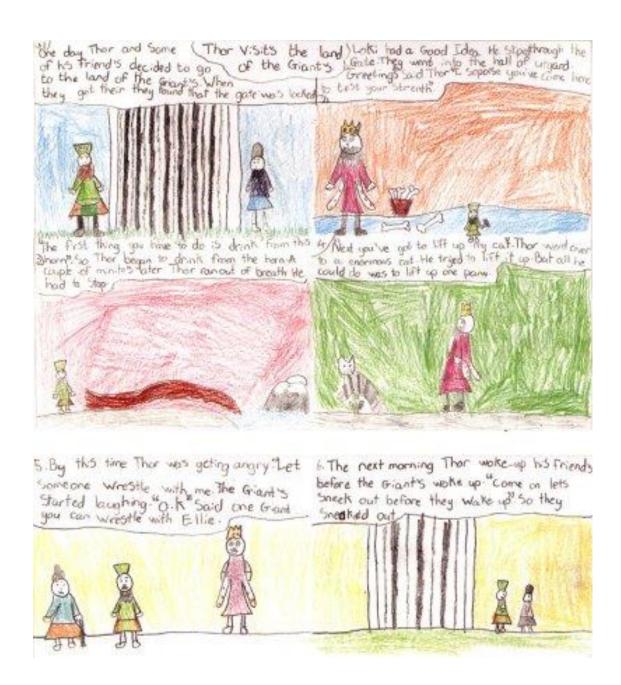
CHILDREN'S WRITING SAMPLES

1. Look at the following two pieces of children's writing.

2. For each piece write a commentary using the linguistic methods to guide you.

3. When you have finished, read the commentaries on the following page and decide how they could be improved.

Sample 1 is by Nathan. He has been asked to write about the main parts of a story his teacher read to the class.

"Thor Visits the Land of the Giants.
Thor had to have a tasts. He had to drink out of a hon
Next He had lift the cat. He fought an old woman

One day Thor and some of his friend's decided to go to the land of the giant's. When they got their they found that the gate was locked

(Thor visits the land of the Giants)

Loki had a good idea. He stept through the gate. They went into the hall of urgard. "Greetings" said Thor "I supose you've come here to test your streath".

The first thing you have to do is drink from this horn". So Thor began to drink from the horn. A couple of minites later Thor ran out of breath. He had to stop.

4. Next you've got to lift up my cat. Thor went over to a enormous cat. He tried to lift it up. But all he could do was to lift up one paw.

5. By this time Thor was getting angry "Let someone wrestle with me. The giant's started laughing. "O.K" said one giant you can wrestle with Ellie.

6. The next morning Thor woke up his friends before the giants woke up. "Come on lets sneek out before they wake up" So they sneaked out

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COMMENTARIES

SAMPLE 1

Nathan's work shows that he can recall ideas from a story that has been read aloud to him. For example, he is able to write appropriate captions for the Norse legend, using the planned structure and pictures to help him. Although each caption makes sense on its own, there is no sequential link between the statements; even the attributive adjective 'Next' as the introduction to one simple declarative sentence does not full clarify which picture follows which. While there is some integration of words and pictures, Nathan's writing does not yet show the use of a narrative form, nor an awareness that the person reading the story needs to have some introduction to the characters, and a sense of why the events are taking place.

Nathan's work reveals some understanding of the need to use full stops at the end of sentences, and of the link between capital letters and sentence punctuation. Many words are correctly spelt, most letters are correctly formed and spacing between words is good. Phonetic spelling of 'fort' instead of 'fought' suggests Nathan may be at the phonetic spelling stage.

SAMPLE 2

The picture caption format invites succinct writing, and Annie shows an ability to select the main elements of the tale while also giving the reader enough detail to follow the story. The picture frames help to structure the writing into coherent paragraphs. Annie captures the interaction of the characters by using direct speech. The narrative commentary indicates feeling and motives ('Loki had a Good Idea', 'By this time Thor was geting angry').

She begins her story with a traditional collocation 'One day' and applies her knowledge of the language of time to structure events and move the story forward: 'The first thing... Next you've got to... By this time... The next morning'. Some imaginative phrases are used which create a lively sense of the action and sustain interest, for example the verb phrase, 'ran out of breath' and using the attributive adjective in 'enormous cat' to give her reader a sense of its size. Annie also understands how to use co-ordinating conjunctions to link her ideas, for example 'But all he could do was to lift up one paw' and ends her story with the simple declarative 'So they sneaked out' which may reflect an intended child reader.

Punctuation is accurate and Annie occasionally uses an apostrophe, although this is sometimes confused with plurals (giant/giant's). Dialogue is punctuated to identify speakers and the captions provide interest for the reader. Although her handwriting is not joined, it is clear and fluent. Spelling is mainly accurate, although there is some homophone misspelling of 'their' instead of there.

A little bit of grammar can go a long way!

Syntax (one of the linguistic frameworks along with lexis, semantics, pragmatics etc) is the study of how words are arranged in a sentence. A sentence is a group of words that make sense and most sentences consist of a **subject** and a **verb**. Most consist of one complete action or **clause**.

Clauses consist of:
- A **subject**: the person or thing performing the action, e.g. *Fran* threw the ball.
- A **verb**: can describe actions (a lexical verb) or describe states (e.g., be, have, do, are **auxiliaries** and can work as main verbs or they help other verbs create tenses).
- **Objects**: this is the thing being acted upon by the subject. E.g. Fran threw *the ball*.

Direct Objects and Indirect Objects

Fran threw Olivia the ball. The **direct object** is 'the ball' – the thing directly done (or acted upon) by the subject, Fran. 'Olivia' is the **indirect object** – Fran did not throw Olivia, she threw the ball. We tend to say the indirect object 'receives' the object of the sentence.

> E.g. Alice got the biscuits for me. (Here the indirect object is ………………..)
> Jess sent all her work to college. (This time the indirect object is ………………...)
> I lent Michael the book. (Here it is ………..)

You can also have indirect objects introduced by the prepositions 'to' and 'for' e.g. 'I lent a book to Emily', or 'I gave a speech for the college'.

What about the structure of clauses? Well, as with any study of language, being able to 'feature spot' (i.e. label the name or structure of a piece of language) is no use unless you are going to write/say something useful about its purpose/how it is used in that context/the pragmatic relevance of it. It is handy however, to be able to use the technical terms to help you identify the structure you want to comment on.

With that in mind, clauses are of 7 types: **Write ones of your own:**

Simon shouted.
S   V
Sophie smiled at the joke.
S   V   O
He listened carefully.
S   V   A
Laura is a scholar.
S   V   C
James gave me a book.
S   V   IO   O
Paula dropped her book on the floor.
S   V   O   A
She got her book stained.
S   V   O   C

A is the **adverbial** – a word, phrase or clause that tells us more about the way in which an action happened. They can refer to time, place, frequency or the manner in which something occurred. E.g. Neil wrote his letter _rapidly_. The bus arrived _on time_. _After a long delay_ the train got here.

C is the **complement** – this gives more information about the subject or object of the clause. E.g. Nick is _a student_. He made his teacher _mad_!

The main thing to understand is how clauses are used within a sentence, e.g. Which is the **main clause** and which the **subordinate clause**. Most of our work in language acquisition will not involve children making complex utterances; so do not worry about this! For your information a **main clause** makes sense on its own and usually carries the main bit of information. The **subordinate clause** is related to the main one but gives us extra information or completes the main clause in some way. It cannot stand on its own and make sense.

> E.g. a parent might say: 'Whatever you do, don't play on the road.'

Underline the main idea and the part that gives more detail relating to the main information (can you see why it is easier if you use the correct technical terms?!) Here, 'whatever' functions as a **_subordinating conjunction_** because it connects the subordinating clause to the main one (other such words are if, so that, because, before, while etc.).

A **simple sentence** has only one clause, e.g. 'I want a biscuit'.
A **compound sentence** has two or more clauses joined together by conjunctions (such as: and, but, or) e.g. 'Adam kicked the ball into the net and we all celebrated the final goal'.
 A **complex sentence** has a main clause and at least one subordinating clause, e.g. 'Please don't hit your brother, although I know he is annoying.' The subordinating clause can be at the start or end of the sentence or embedded within the main clause.

This is the sort of information that is hard to retain if you do not use it frequently. You do not need to label everything in your data in the exam (you don't have timed, for start!). The most important thing is to comment on _how_ language is functioning and for what _purpose_ a particular feature was used. Having the technical 'know-how' should improve your confidence and help you to refer to language accurately gaining more marks for AO1.