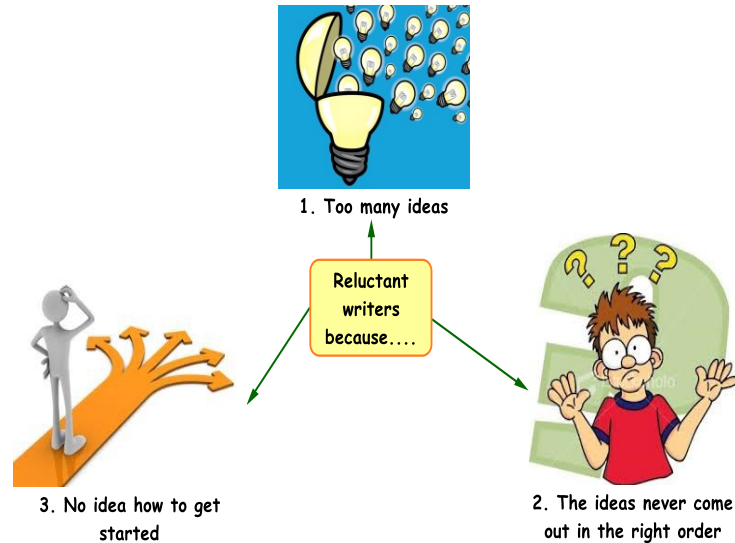


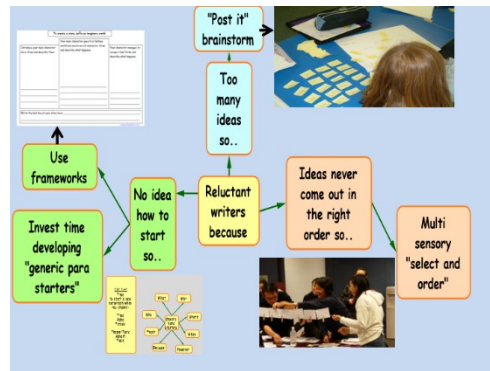
## Getting reluctant writers to write



There are three main reasons why apparently smart students, especially those on the Dyslexia Spectrum, struggle to get their ideas down on paper. They are:

1. **Too many ideas - rarely too few.** But the ideas often come so thick and fast that the student is overwhelmed by possibilities
2. **The ideas never, ever come out in the right order.** Many smart students are smart precisely because they are not linear, sequential, "beginning-middle-end" thinkers. But, while this is great for creativity, it can play havoc with planning
3. **No idea how to get started** - all the ideas are whizzing around and committing that first sentence is the hardest of all, leading to the dreaded "paralysis by analysis"

This is the bad news - the good news is that, once these three issues are addressed, reluctant writers become motivated writers. Here are some solutions:



1. Post it/sticky note brainstorm - to encourage thinking without boundaries
2. Multi-sensory select and order - hands on to compensate for memory and processing issues
3. Carefully selected generic paragraph starters - less is definitely more so scaffolding/frameworks will ease overload

I usually start with fiction and I am currently having pleasing success with a narrative approach based on a search for hidden treasure. Recently I was modelling the technique with Years 2+3 at Moor First School near Stoke and I started by teaching how to mind map.



I use selected pages from Eva Hoffman's excellent book, Teaching Children how to Mind Map which is available from SEN Marketing - <http://www.senbooks.co.uk> - to establish the idea of thinking without boundaries, word association and "streams of ideas". The class embraced the technique with enthusiasm.



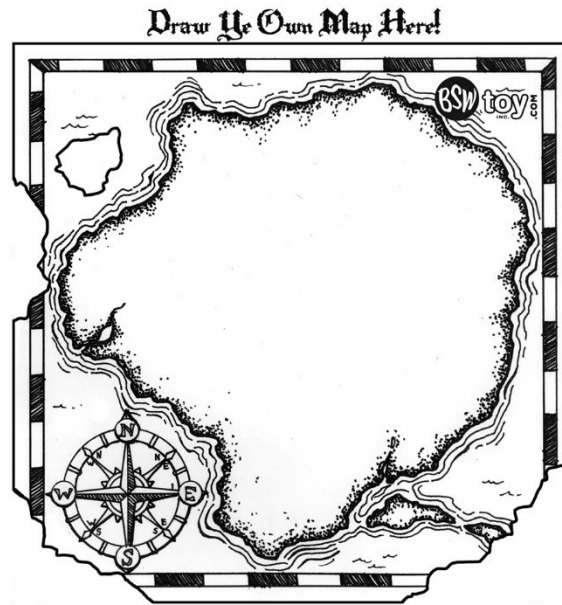
Eva Hoffman's "octopus" is a great introduction to mind mapping

Next I taught brainstorming to encourage more thinking without boundaries and "off the wall" ideas and associations, to introduce the idea of using post it notes to record ideas and also the select and order process..

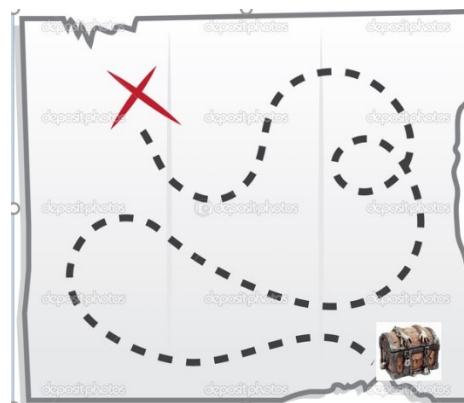


Now we are ready to start developing a story. I much prefer to work with mixed ability groups within a class - even in a setted situation, the technique works best with a range of ability in each group. The process works like this:

1. Choose your table artist in each group. The artist's task is to draw an island with an interesting shape on a sheet of A3 paper.



I also ask for a cross somewhere on the coastline and a treasure chest to be drawn a long way away from the cross. Finally I ask for an interesting route from cross to treasure to be drawn on the map.



The map is then turned over because we are ready for brainstorming. Each group nominates a scribe who is in charge of recording ideas on the post it notes. The ground rules are:

- Only one word on a post it - nouns only to speed up and simplify the process
- No discussion at this stage

Then I set the scene by asking them to think of all the sights, experiences, animals adventures etc. they might encounter on their route from the beach to the treasure. I



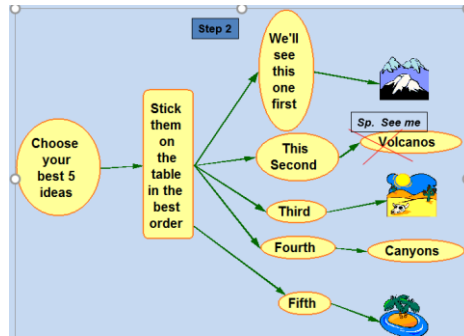
always use a slide show of ideas to get the juices flowing and groups are allowed to magpie my ideas to get started. I say "Off you go" and, within seconds, ideas are being shouted across tables and scribes are writing furiously. At Moor First I was lucky enough to have an adult on each table as the scribe, but this is a bonus.



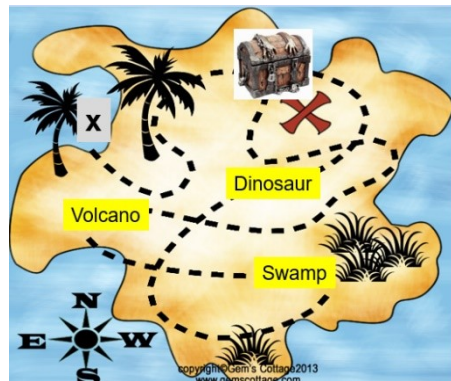
Once groups get going they generate a huge number of ideas which will need to be sorted out later. But experience shows that it is much better to dump all the ideas as they occur and keep the creativity going. A student led brainstorm often looks like this:



The next task is to "go for five" - to choose the best, most exciting, most original ideas and stick them on the table in the best order in which to encounter them.

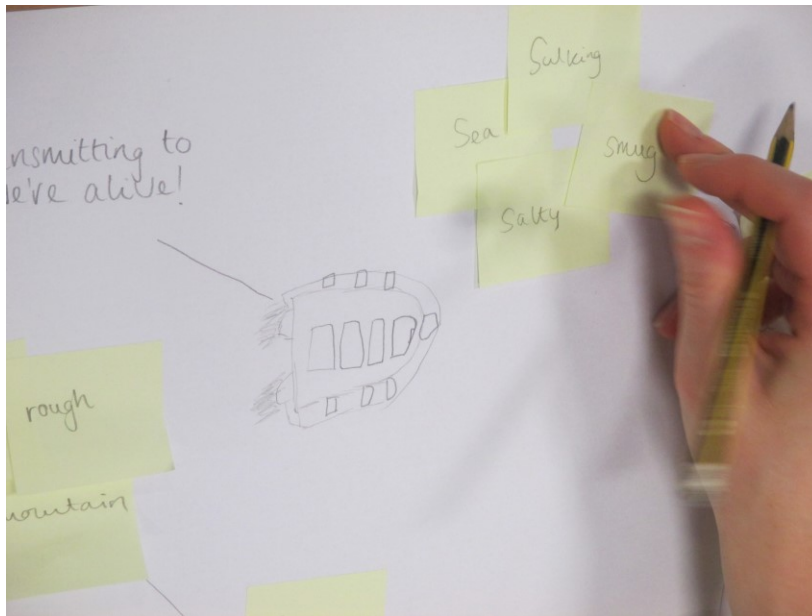


Then turn the map over and begin to stick the post it ideas on the route from the beach to the treasure - I always stress that nothing is fixed and changes can be made to the order, the events etc. as new and better ideas are stimulated by those already on the post it notes.



Now it is time to add some value. I deliberately try to limit the initial brainstorm to nouns- I get better quality words if brain power is focused on noun alone rather than adjectives as well. This is all about chunking the task, which is especially important for students who find the writing process challenging. However they blossom during this step by step approach. It also helps curb the blight of KS2 writing, which is "superfluous, gratuitous adjectives" which definitely earn marks in SATs but make the work practically unreadable! But the time has come for adjectives.

I challenge the groups to come up with at least one classy "wow" adjective for each noun and to write the adjective on a separate post it. This is stuck next to the chosen noun but it may change as this element of the task develops. Writing the adjectives on separate post its allows for drafting without crossing out - many students associate crossing out with failure and this can seriously hinder the drafting process. But few students seem to object to taking a post it off and replacing it with another. So this is powerful kidology!

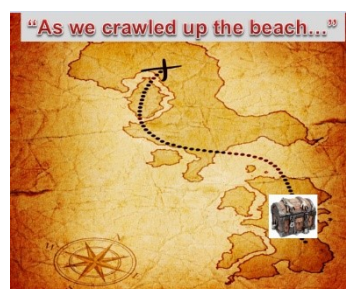


I emphasize the flexibility of this approach by getting them going and then throwing in a series of challenges every minute or so. My favourites are:

- Choose one adjective/noun combination and change it to show alliteration
- Choose one adjective/noun combination and change it to show personification
- Choose one adjective/noun combination and add a simile/metaphor

This usually involves frantic re-writing and re-sticking of post its and reinforces the importance of drafting and being flexible

At this point I have dealt with the issues of too many ideas not coming out the right order. The final challenge is getting started. My aim is to get individual writing based on group planning and there is a temptation at this stage to ask the class to get writing. But this would be a mistake because I am convinced that writing should only happen after talk. Pie Corbett has coined the phrase "Talk for Writing" and, although I have never explored his work, people tell me that our ideas are similar. But this does not address the issue of "Can't get started".



I address this by offering a starter phrase and asking the scribes to start with my phrase or come up with a better one - they usually do and often are interrupted by great ideas from others. "Our ship sank slowly beneath the waves and we struggled ashore. The Captain still had the treasure map and we....." Then the scribe points to each post it and the group tell the story out loud as it unfolds. The best way to tell the story is on the cusp of anarchy as individuals add words and phrases, interrupting each other and sometimes going off on tangents. This creative chaos works much better than saying "You tell that bit and I will do this bit" - there is usually one group which tries to work this way but it rarely produces good results.

A word to the wise at this stage - although anything can be changed and new post its written if required, do not allow the talk to be written down. There is a great temptation for this to happen but the end result will be a homogenous group story with everyone copying the transcript rather than the individual pieces that I am looking for.

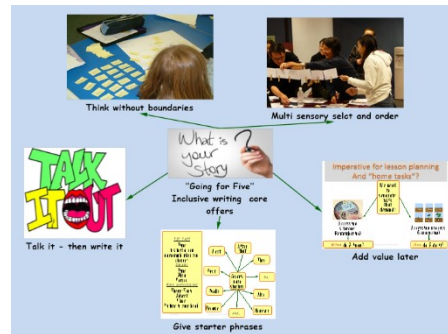
This is where I say "Get writing". The best way to kill this stone dead is to ask for date, title, learning objectives etc to be written first so don't do it - it can always be done later. Instead ask them to leave enough lines for the irrelevant stuff, put their pen/pencil on the page and get writing. Most heads will go down and they will start. If any students are still stuck (their heads will still be up), try asking them how they want to start and offer to write it for them. Then ask for the next sentence and write that as well. After this they are usually away - they just needed the reassurance of the start.

I predict that you will notice three things when you look over the work:

- Your weakest writers will pretty much tell the story as spoken, but it is usually the best piece of writing so far this year
- Your average writers will embellish the spoken story, adding value as they go and, once again, it is often their best piece so far
- Your best writers often go off on a tangent in all manner of flights of fancy, stimulated by the group story but not constrained by it. The story is usually up there with their best writing.



In summary:



I would love to hear of your successes, especially with “reluctant writers”

Have fun.