

Symbols2Write

A toolkit for supporting pupils develop a range of language skills with linked resources using pictures, symbols and words.

Published by Widgit Software

Symbols2Write is a series of activities which has been designed for pupils at an early language level. It starts from the very beginning of early language recognising elements in a picture, and through additional modules introduces different grammatical elements and vocabulary.

The series is based on ideas and materials created by Justin Drew. Justin is a Speech and Language therapist working for Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust (SWBH) in the West Midlands. Speech and Language Therapy is part of the Children's Therapy service.

This approach has been developed in Sandwell and is now used extensively with children and young people with a range of communication and literacy needs.

Acknowledgements

Justin wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Denise Charnock & Kay Brownsword who are also SaLTs in the Sandwell team.

Illustrations are used with permission of Sandwell and West Birmingham hospitals NHS Trust

Illustration artwork by Alan Birch: alanbirch@blueyonder.co.uk

Widgit Symbols (c) Widgit Software 2013

Contents

Introduction to Symbols2Write	Page 3
Overview of the series	Page 4
Colour coding	Page 5
Symbols	Page 6
Encouraging communication	Page 6
Follow on activities	Page 8
Additional resources	Page 9
References	Page 9

Symbols2Write

Symbols2Write form a range of simple tools to help students with communication and/or literacy difficulties to develop a range of basic language skills. It is designed for students at an early stage of describing pictures, telling or retelling a story and reading and writing skills. Symbols2Write is also suitable for reinforcing language work for young students at an early literacy level in most mainstream settings.

It aims to develop three main skills:

1. Understanding and responding appropriately to questions.
2. Story telling such as narrative and sequencing.
3. Writing about a picture, event or story.

By using the pack flexibly, students are encouraged to:

- sustain attention and listening skills
- extend memory and recall
- increase skills in understanding and following instructions
- widen vocabulary and naming skills
- make more sense of sentence structure
- stimulate length of a spoken or written idea
- predict outcomes in a story or event
- develop independent writing.

At a follow-on stage the activities may also help student to:

- predict outcomes in a story or event
- develop independent writing
- develop early reasoning, problem solving and inference skills
- understand important concepts such as first / next / last (or beginning / middle / end) as well as descriptive concepts such as colours, size, shapes and other describing words
- extend the range of expressive language skills, both in talking and writing.

Through the use of colourful illustrations and Widgeit symbols, pupils can develop their knowledge and understanding of simple sentences. The symbols offer the user a visual representation of the word's meaning. When the user is developing their language understanding, the symbols enhance and improve their ability to understand the words within the correct context. Symbols also develop their confidence. A simple colour-coding system is used to assist students in constructing phrases and sentences to describe, comment and talk about single pictures, events and books.

It is hoped that these materials will provide the stimulus for extending the language work using the practitioner's/your own photographs and illustrations once these basic describing and sentence building skills have been developed. This booklet describes ways in you can easily adapt these materials and to teach concepts for higher levels of language work.

Overview of the series

The Symbols2Write series gradually introduces different grammatical elements needed for building sentences, descriptions and eventually short narratives.

The first program in the series, Symbol-Sentences provides a first introduction to subject-verb-object sentence structure. It begins with listening and identifying elements in a picture, building through the steps identifying "Who is in a picture?" "What is he/she doing?" and introducing objects, for example: "The boy is climbing a tree."

The Guide for Symbol-Sentences includes a section on working with students with language difficulties and specifically describes the work of Justin Drew and colleagues supporting children with additional needs.

Symbol-Adjectives extends this by adding descriptors, and introduces the correct terminology for adjectives.

Other programs in the series will explore grammatical elements such as verbs together with present and past tenses. Nouns and noun plurals, prepositions, pronouns, adverbs and connectives will follow.

At each level there is a range of activities around a set of graphics. The accompanying documentation offers suggestions for extending work into other

topics using illustrations and photographs. The entire approach is to build a comprehensive set of activities and to offer frameworks for expansion into topics of interest to the individual pupils.

In this context we use the term “writing” to describe the student building meaningful sentences either using symbol-word cards or the symbol-word combinations in the on-screen grids.

Colour coding

The use of a colour coding system can help students learn how to write and see how the structure of a sentence develops by showing where each word occurs within a sentence.

Symbols2Write uses the following conventions:

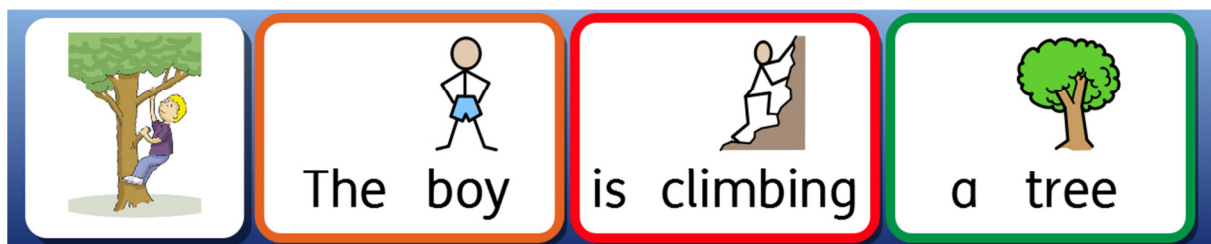
Subjects are Orange (these nouns may be people, animals or items)

Verbs are Red

Objects are green (these nouns may also be people, animals or items)

Descriptive language terms (adjectives and adverbs) are blue

More colours will be introduced as new elements are introduced. Other colours conventions are used elsewhere, however we have chosen these colours as best for viewing on-screen, and give appropriate weight to their role in the sentence.



The colours are used to frame the words before selection, but the colour is not carried forward into the sentence, in order that the sentence flow is not broken. In the Apps, once the sentence is complete, the frames are removed and the elements move together so as to be seen as a whole.

Symbols

Symbols are used to support the key vocabulary. The suite does not use abstract symbols and words that are very high frequency other than where it is essential for the learning. Experience using these apps with young children with a range of abilities shows that the presence of the symbols encourages the student to read the text using the symbol as a reinforcement. They also encourage students to attempt new vocabulary.

The full set of over 12,000 Widgit Symbols are available in the Widgit programs: Communicate: In Print and Communicate: Symwriter2.

Communicate: In Print is ideal for practitioners who would like to print their own vocabulary cards for desk work. Symwriter2 is ideal for making on-screen activities for the student to practice and extend their use of the vocabulary. In these programs you can choose to use the level of symbol support you feel is needed, and to omit symbols that are not necessary.

Some supporting resources for use in these programs will be available to download from the Widgit website.

Encouraging Communication

Practitioners must support children's learning and competence in communicating, speaking and listening, being read to and beginning to read and write. They must also provide children with the confidence, opportunity, encouragement, support and disposition to use their skills in a range of situations and for a range of purposes.

The development and use of communication and language are at the heart of young children's learning. Learning to listen and speak emerge out of non-verbal communication, which includes body language such as facial expression, eye contact, bending the head to listen, hand gesture, and taking turns. These skills develop as babies and young children express their needs and feelings, interact with others and establish their own identities and personalities.

As children develop speaking and listening skills, they build the foundations for reading and writing. They need lots of opportunities to interact with others as they develop these skills, and to use a wide range of resources for making early progress in reading, mark making and writing.

To give all children the best opportunities for effective development and learning in communication, practitioners should give particular attention to:

- Providing opportunities for children to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings and build up relationships with adults and each other;
- Giving opportunities to share and enjoy a wide range of rhymes, music, songs, poetry, stories and non-fiction books;
- Giving opportunities for linking language with physical movement in action songs and rhymes, role play and practical experiences such as cookery and gardening;
- Planning an environment that reflects the importance of language through symbolised signs, notices and books;
- Providing opportunities for children to see adults writing and for children to experiment with writing for themselves through making marks, personal writing symbols and conventional script;
- Providing time and opportunities to develop spoken language through conversations between children and adults, both one-to-one and in small groups. Particular awareness and sensitivity is needed to help children learning English as an additional language;
- Providing time and opportunities to develop their phonological awareness through small group and individual teaching, when appropriate;
- Planning opportunities for all children to become aware of languages and writing systems other than English, and communication systems such as signing and Braille;
- Early identification of and response to any particular difficulties in children's language development;
- Close teamwork between bilingual workers, speech therapists and practitioners, where appropriate;
- Opportunities for children who use alternative communication systems to develop ways of recording and accessing texts to develop their skills in these methods.

Follow-on Activities

Once the student is able to write sentences at this level, you can begin to extend the length and structure of the sentence by introducing the following:

1. Extending sentences to introduce additional vocabulary: objects, adjectives, pronouns and then question words and connectives.
2. Introduce early sequencing / narrative skills using a 3 part picture sequence (e.g. man getting a banana, peeling it and then eating it.). Students talk about the pictures and write or build simple sentences.
3. Early predicting skills – once the above steps have been completed for a 3 part picture sequence, can the student recall what happens next when shown the first pictures.
4. This can then be extended using 4 and 5 part sequence pictures and lead towards simple story books or classroom activities.
5. Predicting some information which isn't obvious from the story (e.g. after a character has completed an action, what does the student think he/she might do next?).
6. Developing reasoning skills such as using language for thinking, problem solving and inference (e.g. questions beginning with why and how – “why is the girl getting into bed?”; “why is the boy climbing the tree.” and “What will he do next?”. For more information about the level of questioning, please refer to Marion Blank's 'Blank Levels of Questioning'.
7. Re-tell stories which have personal significance. For example “What happened at the week-end/on a school trip?”
8. Expanding narrative, questions and writing across all curriculum subjects (i.e. not just as part of English).
9. Generalising skills learnt using the Symbol Apps either at school or at home and making the most of every conversational opportunity. This might include talking about favourite stories or TV programmes, what happened in the playground or explaining the journey to school.
10. Developing Meta-Linguistic skills such as moving students from symbol-supported text to whole word reading and developing spelling skills. Throughout the printable resource activities the student is encouraged to develop text skills by copying the text. The resources do not use symbols for the small words such as ‘the’ and ‘is’.

For each level of work described in the hierarchy there are different activities to follow. Learning and confidence can be reinforced by carrying out tasks in different media and using a variety of approaches. As each language level is achieved, sentence length will increase and eventually build into sequences of sentences – this is the beginning of story-building.

Additional Resources

Other Apps in the Symbols2Write series,

Vocabulary cards for Symbol-Sentences to print from Communicate: In Print available as a free download from the Widgit Website,

Symwriter 2 writing activities, included in the Symwriter 2 example files. A free update from Symbwriter to Symwriter 2 is available to download.

There are very many more symbol supported materials available from the Widgit Resources area than those specifically designed to support Symbols2Write work. For example the Traditional Stories packs contain all the illustrations and vocabulary and encourage retelling the story from pre-set resources.

References

Blank, M., Rose, S. and Berlin, L. (1978) *The Language of Learning: The Pre-School Years*. New York: Grune and Stratton Inc.

Bryan, A (1997) *Colourful Semantics*. In Chiat, S., Law, J. and Marshall, J. (Eds) *Language Disorders in Children and Adults: Pyscholinguistic Approaches to Therapy*. London; Whurr Publishing

DfE (2013) *Early Years Outcomes*

DfE (2013) *The National Curriculum for England – Framework document*

Ebbels, S.H. (2007). *Teaching grammar to school-aged children with Specific Language Impairment using Shape Coding*. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 2., 3, 1, pp 67-93

Blank, M – (From Elklan materials)