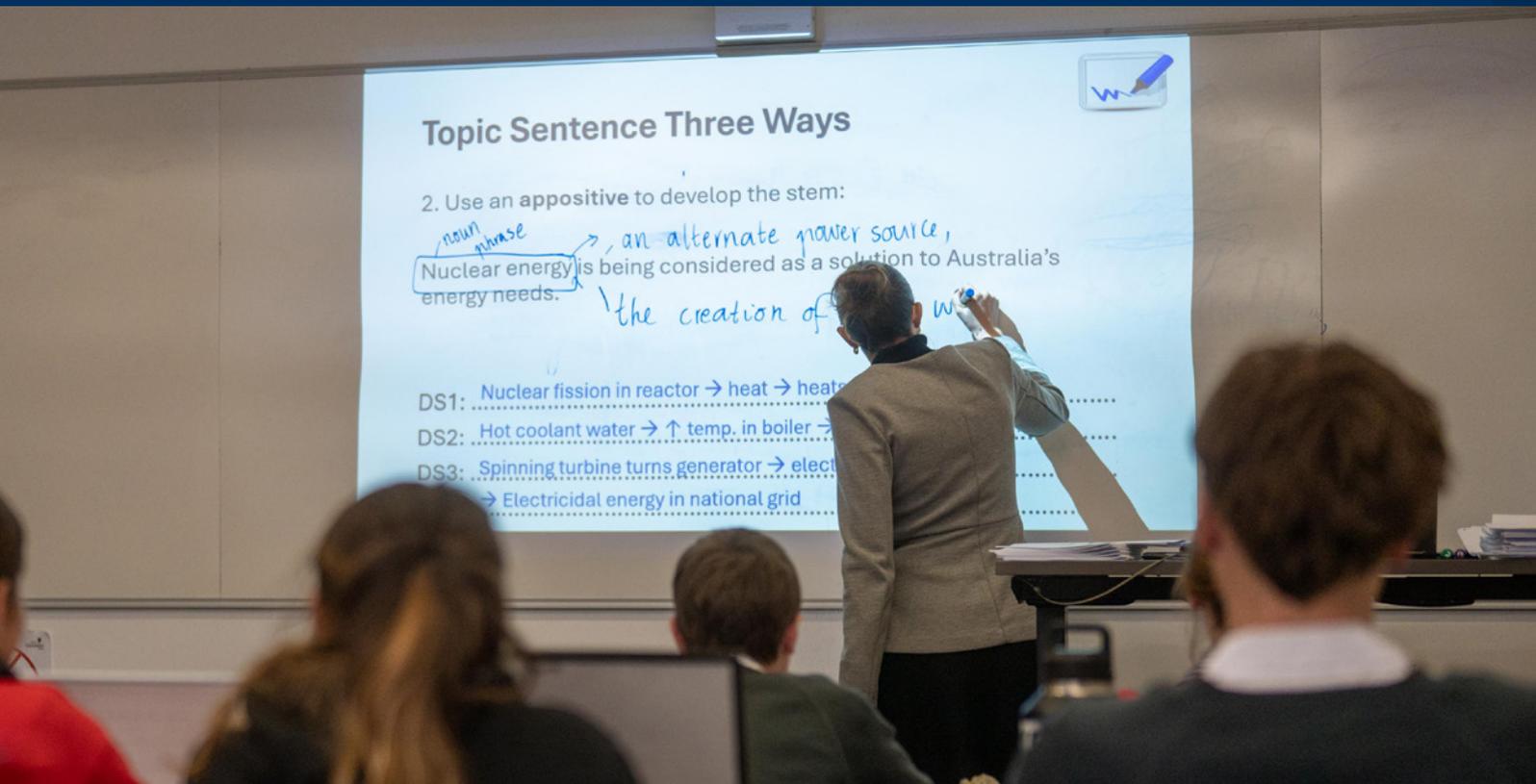


Build professional knowledge | Develop techniques  
and practices | Improve whole-school processes

## Case study

# Partnering with schools to refine and enhance AERO's School Writing Instruction Framework

March 2026



This case study looks at how the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) worked with 3 schools to trial and develop our School Writing Instruction Framework (SWIF). It highlights key learnings about how teachers were supported in teaching writing effectively and the impact this had on student writing outcomes.

## Overview

Writing proficiency is not only central to a student's success during their school years but also influences their personal and vocational outcomes after they've finished their schooling.<sup>1,2</sup> While guidance for teachers on reading instruction is readily available, guidance on writing instruction is limited, and the quality of research on effective ways to teach writing is variable.

We recently launched our School Writing Instruction Framework (SWIF) – a school-wide approach to strengthening students' writing – to support schools in addressing this gap. To ensure the framework was relevant, usable and effective, we embarked on a year-long collaboration with schools to pilot and develop the SWIF. The intention of this work was to understand whether building writing knowledge with Year 8 teachers and students improved students' writing skills, and to apply what we learned to refining and enhancing the SWIF.

## Approach

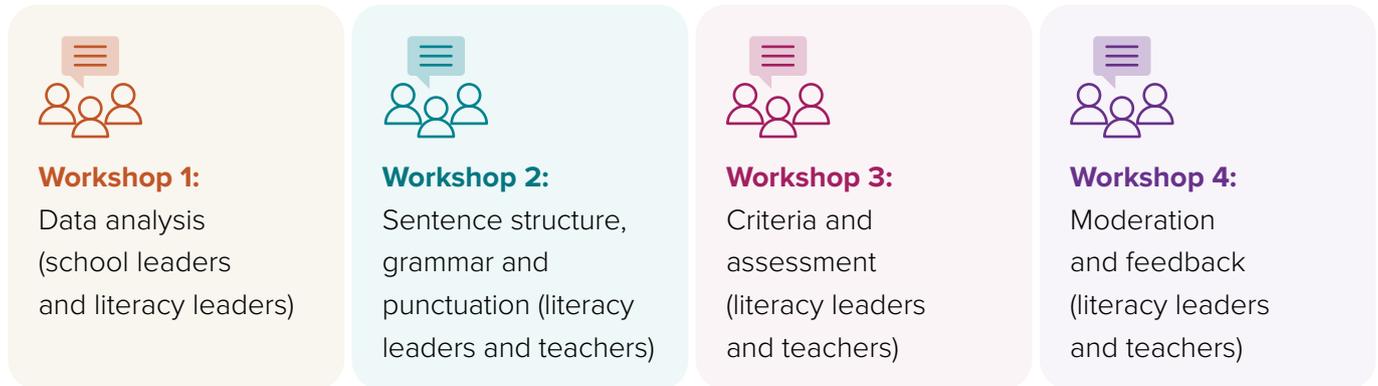
We partnered with 3 secondary schools in different contexts to gain a variety of insights. These schools were located in Western Australia, South Australia and New South Wales and differed in terms of their co-educational or single-sex status, sizes and Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 summarises the context for each of these 3 schools.

**Table 1:** Partner school context

	School 1	School 2	School 3
<b>Cohort</b>	Single sex	Co-educational	Co-educational
<b>Year make-up</b>	Foundation to Year 12	Foundation to Year 12	Year 7 to Year 12
<b>Location</b>	Major cities	Major cities	Major cities
<b>Campus</b>	Multi-campus	Multi-campus	Single campus
<b>No. of teaching staff</b>	126	125	59
<b>No. of students</b>	883	1,425	864
<b>ICSEA score</b>	<b>1,168</b>	<b>968</b>	<b>941</b>

The SWIF project focused on a pilot group of Year 8 teachers in each school, as well as their students. Each school's English faculty was involved in the pilot, along with 2 or more other faculties to highlight that teaching writing is a shared responsibility and a skill that needs to be taught across all subjects. A nominated literacy leader was responsible for leading the SWIF in each school. School leaders provided literacy leaders with additional time to work directly with us and support teachers in embedding learnings from workshops into practice.

School leaders and Year 8 teachers completed a survey at the start of the project to indicate their level of confidence in teaching writing, as well as how much time they spent teaching writing skills. They then participated in 4 interactive professional learning workshops and accessed associated teaching resources developed by AERO.



Workshop 1 was delivered to school leaders and literacy leaders to help them understand students' writing needs in their school. It covered analysis of the school's Year 7 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) writing data and teacher survey data. Facilitated discussions focused on self-reported teaching practices in writing and teacher confidence to teach writing. These discussions included considering connections between how much time teachers explicitly taught writing and student writing outcomes. School leaders then decided what they would share about students' writing needs in their school with the wider staff.

Workshops 2, 3 and 4 were delivered to literacy leaders and teachers in each school over a period of 6 months. In 2 of the schools, workshops were delivered in person and, in the third, they were delivered online.

To complement the workshops, literacy leaders used a range of strategies to support teachers in embedding effective writing instruction in their practice. These strategies included:

- modelling effective writing instruction – for example, demonstrating a 'do now' exercise on including dependent clauses in complex sentences at the start of a lesson
- providing instructional coaching to help teachers embed learning and explicitly teach writing in their subject area, along with practical guidance and specific examples of how to teach different sentence types in the context of specific subject areas
- facilitating meetings and informal check-ins for group and individual writing instruction discussions, including well-timed conversations after workshops so teachers could clarify understanding and plan to apply learning in practice
- promoting writing instruction across the school – for example, by delivering presentations to the wider staff and displaying posters in classrooms showing definitions of grammatical terms and sentence types
- supporting the integration of writing instruction into curriculum planning
- helping with assessment task design and marking moderation practices.

To support literacy leaders in this work, we held fortnightly meetings with the literacy leaders to discuss progress, share successes and explore challenges. Literacy leaders from all schools also met online after each workshop to network, share resources and discuss plans for writing beyond the project.

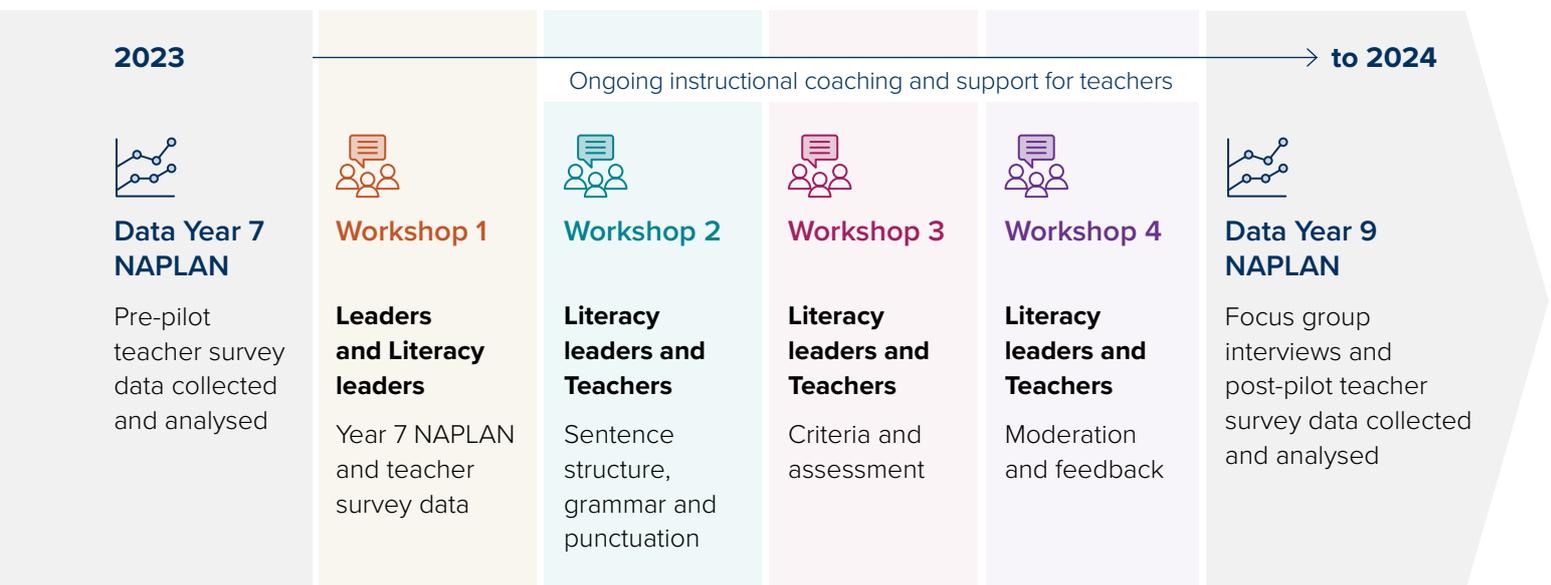
At the end of the pilot, teachers completed the survey again to see if their level of confidence in teaching writing and the time they spent teaching writing had changed. Four school leaders, 3 literacy leaders and 29 teachers across the 3 schools also took part in focus group interviews. Interview questions were targeted for each role.

Questions for:

- **leaders** focused on why they initially thought the pilot would support their school, how they supported its rollout and what enablers and barriers they encountered
- **literacy leaders** focused on the actions they took to support the SWIF, the time they allocated to this work and the sustainability of any changes in teachers' writing instruction
- **teachers** focused on the influence of the workshops on knowledge and practice.

We then analysed data from survey responses and focus group interviews, along with the cohort's subsequent Year 9 NAPLAN writing data, to identify how the SWIF had impacted teachers' confidence and practice, as well as student writing outcomes. We also gathered literacy leaders' and teachers' feedback on the workshops to help us refine the content and activities. Figure 1 summarises this process.

**Figure 1:** Timeline of AERO workshops and support



## Key learnings

Our year-long collaboration with schools to pilot and develop the SWIF showed the SWIF was relevant across the 3 school contexts and to Year 8 students' learning. It also showed the SWIF supported teachers across subject areas in explicitly teaching writing. Postpilot survey responses indicated teacher confidence to teach writing and the time spent teaching writing skills had increased by the end of the project. Reflections from the focus group interviews highlighted key actions that helped establish and support a school-wide approach to writing instruction.

## Leaders' commitment and support

We learned that leaders' visible commitment and practical support for the initiative positively influenced buy-in from participating teachers, as well as wider interest and engagement across staff. For example, by allocating additional time beyond the workshops for teachers to collaborate and embed writing in curriculum planning, leaders signalled writing instruction was a priority and that sustained momentum was important. Similarly, providing time for literacy leaders to lead the project and support teachers to reflect on and apply learning in practice further signalled that strengthening students' writing was important and aligned to the school's strategic goals.

## Going slow early to go fast later

Beginning with a pilot group of teachers provided a manageable starting point. This allowed leaders to carefully select which teachers to involve and enabled the school to learn what worked best before rolling out the approach with the wider staff. Slowing down at the start was practical and the schools benefited from this measured approach.

I don't think anyone was ever hurt by slowing down as long as you've got enough momentum.

— School leader

## Engaging and supporting staff

Engaging teachers at the start, and throughout the pilot, was important to its success. Sharing findings from the teacher survey and analysis of student writing data with staff at the outset of the pilot was helpful for building a shared understanding of why writing instruction had been identified as a focus and generating buy-in for the professional development activities.

Other helpful activities throughout the pilot included structured meetings with participants to share and discuss progress, alongside more informal check-ins. Some leaders spoke to the benefits of these low-stakes professional conversations, and how they helped to create a safe environment where teachers could ask questions about writing and grammatical concepts without fear of judgement.

We have a couple of groups of teachers at the school and the key to keeping those groups motivated has just been regular informal check-ins at lunch, every 3 to 4 weeks. [We] make those meetings really low stakes, 'come talk about it'.

— School leader

## Literacy leaders supporting writing instruction

Having a nominated literacy leader to lead the SWIF and support teachers in each school was beneficial. The literacy leaders ensured that momentum between workshops was sustained through enhanced teacher collaboration and instructional coaching. Literacy leaders drew on other teachers' valuable expertise – particularly in areas like grammar – to help support colleagues. For example, members of English faculties were asked to model explicit writing instruction for teachers of other subjects.

The role of literacy leader proved particularly helpful in supporting teachers who taught subjects other than English. Literacy leaders spent time with these teachers further exploring and identifying how and why writing was important to their subject and students' success, as well as how to best incorporate writing into their subjects. For example, one literacy leader modelled for a Health and Physical Education (HPE) teacher how to incorporate a 10-minute 'verb challenge' into their lesson and then observed and provided feedback on this section of the HPE teacher's lesson. The HPE teacher found this practical example helped them incorporate writing into their lessons.

Whenever you had something that was specific to their faculty, like an example or even a sentence written in their faculty language, that's when ... their eyes lit up, then they could see the benefits of it.

— Literacy leader

## Creating a metalanguage and valuing writing across subjects

Teachers found that having a shared language – a metalanguage – to talk about sentence structure, grammar and punctuation was particularly helpful. Many grammatical concepts were new for some teachers, and further clarification or contextualisation was needed for others. This was the case for both English teachers and teachers of other subjects.

Regular conversations between participants, supported by literacy leaders, helped establish this shared language and understanding about writing. The metalanguage helped English teachers and teachers of other subjects recognise and articulate the features of quality writing when talking with colleagues, when teaching, when marking students' written work and when providing feedback.

I think for me, the biggest thing that helps is having a common vocabulary that the students are now very familiar with.

— Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) teacher

Post-pilot survey responses indicated that many teachers who took part in the project began to see writing as something important and pertinent to their own subject area – not just to English. As they developed knowledge and skills, their confidence grew and teachers reported spending more time on teaching specific writing skills like sentence structure, cohesion and parts of speech.

I do think [writing] is really important and it's a skill that needs to be developed in pretty much every single subject. I feel it has opened up my eyes a bit more to allow students time in class to practise the skill we're assessing.

— HASS teacher

## Assessment, criteria and feedback

Teachers valued taking time to consider how clearly assessment tasks in different subjects set out the writing demands for students. Opportunities to strengthen this clarity were identified, and teachers were supported in applying principles of assessment design and [AERO's writing assessment criteria](#) with the writing demands of assessment tasks. This ensured assessment tasks clearly described the writing skills students were expected to understand and demonstrate so they were better set up to achieve success.

Teachers also reported the value in helping students use AERO's student [self-assessment tool](#) to complement assessment tasks and criteria. This tool helped students become familiar with the purpose of assessment criteria and take greater responsibility for their learning and the quality of their writing.

I thought the [AERO] criteria were very succinct and addressed the language that we needed to be looking at.

— English teacher

Opportunities for teachers to moderate assessments together were also seen as important for instilling confidence in assessing student writing and aligning judgments with respective curriculum standards of achievement.

I think especially, being a new teacher, understanding the importance of moderation and sitting down with your colleagues and recognising what each grade band actually looks like – that was really good.

— English teacher

## Improving students' writing

When we examined the NAPLAN writing data from all 3 schools, there was an increase in the percentages of students improving in the writing criteria of sentence structure and vocabulary from Year 7 to Year 9. Two out of the 3 schools also improved in the criterion of cohesion. This suggests that explicitly teaching technical writing skills, like sentence structure and cohesion, may have positively affected other criteria, such as vocabulary, and that developing sentence fluency may have helped students include more varied and sophisticated vocabulary in their writing.

I really did love looking at our student examples. I think that brings a lot of awareness to how our students are going, but also how we might be delivering our teaching for our students. I loved being able to unpack and see that in writing... I think that was quite good and beneficial for us.

— HASS teacher



## Conclusion

While teaching writing in schools is often the role of English teachers, every teacher can have an impact on the way students write. Writing is a skill that needs to be embedded across subject areas through explicit teaching, regular practice and quality assessment tasks. AERO's partnerships with schools to refine and enhance the SWIF helped us identify key actions that schools can take to lead an approach to writing instruction across subjects.

We learned that leaders' commitment to embedding writing instruction across the school and the actions they take can positively influence teachers' engagement and development. When leaders' actions are carefully planned and support teachers' ongoing collaboration and learning, teachers can develop a shared understanding and language of writing and become more confident in teaching writing skills across the curriculum. Teachers can more readily see how and why writing is important to the subject they teach.

We also learned that when a literacy leader is supported in leading an approach to writing instruction, they can provide ongoing guidance in structured and informal ways to sustain momentum. Providing literacy leaders with time to help embed learning in curriculum materials and daily practice helps ensure that formal professional learning, such as workshops, leads to sustained enhancements in writing instruction across subjects.

These key actions were identified through working with 3 schools. Future research with a larger number of schools in different jurisdictions could help strengthen and refine the findings. For example, future research could explore how professional development and explicit teaching of writing could be embedded beyond just a pilot group of teachers and students, and the impact this might have on student writing results in subsequent years of schooling.

AERO's partnerships with schools were invaluable in helping us understand how schools can lead an approach to writing instruction so that all students can write and communicate their learning effectively across subjects. These partnerships affirmed that the most effective way to improve student writing is to systematically build teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching the types of writing most relevant to their subject areas as they connect to the curriculum.

## Endnotes

- 1 Graham, S. (2006). Writing. In P. A. Alexander & P. H. Winne (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 457–478). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- 2 Graham, S. (2019). Changing how writing is taught. *Review of Research in Education*, 43(1), 277–303. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18821125>
- 3 Drawing from 2023 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority My School data.