

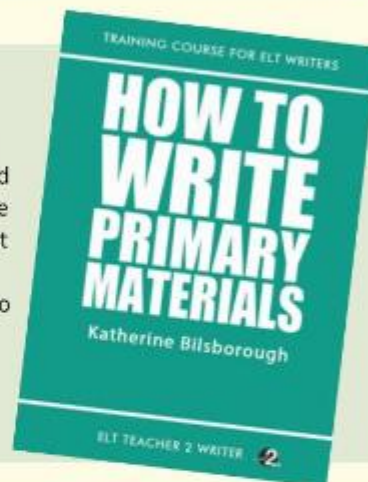


## How to Write Primary Materials

Katherine Bilsborough  
(ELT Teacher 2 Writer, 2020)

Reviewed by Barbara Hoskins Sakamoto

In 2016, I asked Katherine Bilsborough to teach an online class for the International Teacher Development Institute about writing ELT materials. I had only 'met' her online, but she really seemed to know about creating ELT materials, and was equally good at explaining it to others. As you may have discovered in your own experience as a student teacher, that is a pretty rare combination. At that point, Katherine had never taught an online course, and the first edition of *How to Write Primary Materials* was not yet available. Her course ended up being one of the most popular iTDi had ever offered, especially among teachers of children and teenagers.



I've been creating ELT materials for primary learners for about 30 years and hope that I can always learn something new and become a better writer and materials designer. I was excited to get that first copy of Katherine's book, first published as an e-book version in 2016 and I did learn something new about creating materials for primary children.

The paperback version was published earlier this year, and at the start, Katherine explains how she started creating materials for her own students for the same reason most of us do – what we need doesn't exist, or if it is available, we can't afford it. She started sharing her materials with other teachers, and eventually Oxford University Press came calling. Since then, Katherine has created just about everything in the young learner materials ecosystem, working for just about every major ELT publisher in the process. *How to Write Primary Materials* is her effort once again to share what she does and how she does it.

The table of contents is not just a list of what the book contains; it's also a peek at the types of content Katherine has written in her own career. In addition to learning how to write activities for primary, readers learn how to write art descriptions for illustrators, songs, stories, chants, and audio scripts. The stated aims of the book are to provide an overview of types of primary

materials and to provide both background information and specific suggestions about working on materials for this age range.

Each unit includes an explanation with examples from Katherine's professional experience, followed by a task that allows teachers to apply the information they have learned, and commentary about the task to provide additional explanations. For example, in the section explaining the various challenges writers face in working with materials for children between the ages of 4 and 11, Katherine brings up constraints that teachers of primary may already consider common sense such as the restrictions of a national curriculum, the need for specific competencies or exam preparation.

She also introduces challenges that might be new to teachers who hope to become professional materials writers for this age range – for example, having to include 21st century skills or meet competencies that are different from their personal teaching context and considering both age and level in choosing topics, content, and artwork. The task asks teachers to match the targeted age level to four illustrations taken from coursebooks. The commentary for the task provides the correct answers, but also additional information about why each answer is correct. Other tasks have teachers write their own activities, and then compare them to similar activities in published coursebooks.

Toward the end of the book, Katherine offers advice for ways that teachers can be pro-active in finding work as materials writers, including contacting publishers with samples of their writing, registering with writers' databases, like the one ELT Teacher 2 Writer offers, and starting a blog or website to increase visibility. The glossary included at the end of the book is a useful addition for teachers who may not be familiar with all the terms related to materials writing.

Katherine has clearly done it all in materials development for primary, and her expertise shows in the advice she provides in this book. Every unit is filled with practical advice, examples to show the advice in action, and a chance to practice using the advice in application tasks. In less than 70 pages the book gives teachers all the guidance they need to create effective, creative materials for their primary learners or for publication. The book's strength is its practicality.

In a short book like this, it isn't possible to delve into the theory or research underpinning materials development. If you want to understand how language acquisition principles might inform materials development, this book wouldn't be your first choice. In keeping with the length of the book, Katherine opts to focus on practical how-to rather than why it works. For teachers who do want to know more about the theories that guide materials development, there are excellent books by Brian Tomlinson and others to investigate.

In my experience, teachers of primary children appreciate practical advice and guides. If they are developing materials for their own classes, their focus is on becoming better at doing that. If they

are beginning to explore developing materials for publication, their initial focus is still on practical skills. Since primary English teachers also typically pay for books out of their own pockets, a practical, inexpensive book will be more attractive than a more theoretical book that is significantly more expensive. Understanding the research and other theoretical foundations of materials development is important, of course, but a short guide that includes advice and examples from someone who understands that theoretical foundation is invaluable to a teacher strapped for time and/or cash.

Asking Katherine to teach a course on creating ELT materials was one of the best decisions I've made. Buying *How to Write Primary Materials* was an equally good decision, and I highly recommend the book to other teachers and materials writers. I think even experienced materials writers would appreciate the book, because the types of materials we are asked to create are constantly changing. However, the teachers who would find the greatest value in this purchase are those who want to learn how to create more innovative and effective activities for their own students, or for teachers who want to make that initial transition from primary English teacher to materials writer.

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