

# TEACHING KIDS TO WRITE

by Diane and Roy Speed<sup>1</sup>

TEACHING YOUR KIDS TO WRITE is one of the most important challenges in homeschooling, but there is a multitude of approaches out there and plenty of contradictory advice. What's more, parents who've taken a shot at teaching their kid to write have found the task not nearly as easy or as straightforward as it looks. So we thought we'd write a series of articles on the subject—try to clear up a few misconceptions and point homeschooling parents in some useful directions. Here's our plan for the series:

- Part 1: *The Importance of Reading* will address two related issues: 1) the role that *reading* plays in the development of *writing* skills; 2) the skills a child learns exclusively from reading—i.e., will acquire in virtually no other activity.
- Part 2: *Choosing Good Books* will help parents steer small children to the kinds of reading that seem especially helpful.
- Part 3: *Principles of Writing Instruction* will lay out a number of critical and universal truths about the skill. It will help parents distinguish clearly the manual skill of handwriting from the mental labor of writing. It will also provide concrete suggestions for teaching your kids to write at a stage when their handwriting is not yet up to the task. And finally, this section will address the proper role of grammar instruction.

*Two homeschooling parents examine a critical skill—and what we can do to help our kids succeed with it.*

## Part 1: The Importance of Reading

ROY TEACHES WRITING to employees of corporations and large government organizations, and his clients frequently ask him to assess employee writing and make specific recommendations about how best to proceed—basically asking, *How do we go about improving this employee's writing?* Every once in a while, when looking at a sample of a particular employee's writing, Roy's heart sinks: the writing is a loose jumble of words, confused fragments, almost unintelligible. In such situations Roy tells his clients, with regret, that his company's seminars won't be effective with this person, that the kind of help this person needs lies beyond the scope of his company's services.

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<sup>1</sup> A word about ourselves seems in order: Diane has been homeschooling our seven-year-old son for a few years now and has recently begun laying groundwork for homeschooling our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. She has written a number of articles on homeschooling and is the founder of CLASSICAL KIDS, a group comprising a number of families in western Connecticut who share an interest in what is called the "classical approach" to homeschooling.

Roy is the president of SALIENT, INC., a small Connecticut-based firm dedicated to a single pursuit: teaching writing to people in the business world. For twelve years he has designed courseware for adults in writing, persuasion, and even grammar and usage. These experiences have taught him a number of important lessons that we have been applying to our homeschooling.

With such employees, in other words, a writing class simply won't work, won't have the desired effect. The problem, we suspect, can be traced to that individual's early childhood—a huge gap in that person's education, one that cannot be filled with a single class or even a dozen classes. Granted, some such cases may be the result of a learning disability. But our concern here is the others—the individuals whose brain functions were normal throughout childhood yet who, as adults, have trouble writing a complete sentence or even distinguishing a complete sentence from a fragment. What about them—what is the nature of the gap in their educations?

We suspect that it's largely a dearth of reading.

### EARLIEST WRITING LESSONS

Children learn their first, most important writing lessons not in writing class—not through conscious attention to writing skills—but through *reading*. Of course, when we say reading, we don't mean the occasional storybook a child takes up somewhere between hide-&-seek, baseball, PlayStation, and cartoons on TV; we mean complete *immersion* in reading. We mean reading as a way of life, a habit formed at an early age that grows into a life-long love affair with *books*. — Show us a strong writer, and we'll show you someone who was initially a strong *reader*.

Another way of putting it: Children absorb writing lessons from their reading in much the same way they absorb grammar lessons simply from listening. Ever hear a four-year-old say, *We went to the store and buyed lots of things!* —Notice that *buyed*? The child has absorbed a grammar rule, i.e., that when you speak about a past action, you add *-ed* to the action word; hence *buyed*. Equally important in such a sentence, though, is the word *went*; not *goed*, but *went*. In other words, the child is not only learning the rules; she has begun to absorb the exceptions to those rules as well. —Sophisticated lessons, without any classes in the subject.

Such learning-by-osmosis, in fact, forms the foundation of a widely acclaimed method for studying music—the Suzuki method. Shinichi Suzuki was a pioneer in early childhood education and music education, and at the root of his methods was a single observation: he noticed that a child born in Japan learns to speak Japanese perfectly in only a few years—and seemingly with no language lessons; likewise, a child born in France will learn to speak French fluently the same way. How can this happen? Suzuki's theory was that simply by *having the sound in the environment*, the child absorbs the language.

Mr. Suzuki correctly reasoned that the same approach could be applied to the learning of music. Consider the experience of our son—since the age of three he has been learning the classical guitar through the Suzuki method. The key to that method is immersion: in our home he often hears a selection of particular songs playing in the background; a couple of times each week he attends lessons in which he learns to play those same songs himself; each day he sees Diane play the songs on her guitar and then practices them himself. The result of this near-constant contact is that now, at the age of seven, he is playing fairly complex classical pieces—all without being able to *read music*. He has absorbed music, in other words, in a manner that exactly parallels the way he learned English.

What does all this have to do with learning to write? Well, we suspect that the key to good writing is early immersion in *reading*—that learning to write begins with absorbing *written* English, just as learning to speak begins with absorbing *spoken* English. And why *early* immersion? Because it is a well-documented fact that children's brains have certain facilities that they will lose with age—e.g., the ability to learn languages, the ability to memorize large quantities of information, and so on.

To sum up: If you would like your children to be able to *write* at a later stage, then you must surround them with *written words* when they are young.

### WHAT READING TEACHES

All of this may sound obvious, but beware: it is easy to confuse the skills involved in producing *spoken English* with those involved in producing *written English*. They are not the same. Remember the adult employees who cannot write complete sentences? They *speak* complete sentences all the time; their *speech* is coherent. But writing requires them to use a different form of the language—one they cannot access *if they never acquired it in the first place*.

So what are the elements of this language called Written English? And what precisely are the lessons we learn exclusively through early reading? We suspect that they include the following:

- **Story structure/sequencing information.** Kids love stories, and by hearing hundreds and hundreds of stories (with lots of repetition), kids naturally absorb narrative structure. In this structure, there is always 1) a setup of the principal characters and situation—*Once upon a time there were three little pigs who lived in a cottage with their mother...*; 2) the action of the story—*No sooner had he finished his house than along came the wolf...*; and 3) the conclusion of the action—*and they all lived happily ever after*.

The ability to package facts in the form of a story—i.e., convey information in a logical sequence—is a key skill in communication generally, and it’s critical to the writing of adults: *To the best of our knowledge our daughter has never had any severe allergic reactions. But last week, shortly after our return from a vacation in Florida...* It’s important to notice that the ability to package and present information in this manner is something kids don’t get from watching a cartoon on TV; this ability is far more strongly represented and reinforced in written stories, which have a built-in “packager,” the narrator, who *models the critical skill*. When left to their own devices, moreover, kids do not naturally develop this skill—a fact that slaps you in the face if you listen to teenagers relate a story using their own conventions:

*And so I’m like*—[drop jaw and widen eyes]—*and she’s all*—[wrinkle up nose]—*and so I’m like*— [stick tongue out and make gagging noise].

- **Formal language and expression.** When reading, we’re exposed to a version of English that tends to be more formal and precise than speech. In well-written stories you may find sentences such as this:

For three days and nights he lay entombed...

—Notice that word *lay*? It’s the past tense of the verb *lie*, a verb that most Americans get wrong in their speech, and a word whose correct use many children will encounter only in reading.

- **Punctuation.** Reading is our only exposure to punctuation. Without reading, in other words, we would have no concept of commas, periods, colons, and so on, nor would we be sensitive to use and placement of apostrophes 1) to show possession—there being no distinction in speech between *countries*, *country’s*, and *countries’*—or 2) to form contractions, there being no distinction in speech between *who’s* and *whose*, *it’s* and *its*, *they’re* and *their*, and so on.

More important, through reading we get accustomed to ingesting information in the form of complete, written sentences, with all the right punctuation in the right places; and a steady diet of complete, written sentences will eventually result in our ability to produce them ourselves—that is, write.

- **Vocabulary.** At any given time our son is reading at two different levels: during the day he devours books on his own, e.g., he’ll find a mystery series written at his level and in a matter of days seems to go through every book in the series (or whichever ones are found at our

local library). By contrast, in his reading with Diane—or with Roy in the evening—he may tackle much more demanding books, books that significantly challenge and expand his vocabulary. To illustrate, with a quick glance at such a book we notice the following passages:

*For a long while he feigned sleep...*

*... as chivalrous as ever...*

*... the undisputed champion...*

*... in a linden wood...*

*... replied the vagabond...*

*... the Irish envoy...*

Notice the uncompromising vocabulary: every one of these passages contains a word that most seven-year-olds will find challenging, and even some adults (*linden*?—we looked it up; it's a type of tree). And not just words, but phrases or expressions that a child would likely encounter in no other activity but reading: *stolen glances... beyond praise... fair content...*

- **Packaging devices.** There are any number of devices that writers use to help convey complex information, and these devices—once internalized through reading—can be used in both speech and writing. Here's an example: the other day, after reading something on Alexander the Great, our seven-year-old was explaining to Diane something about Alexander, and in the course of that explanation he said, *You know why he did that, Mom?* And Diane said, No, tell me why. *Well, for two reasons,* he said. *One, \_\_\_\_\_... And two, \_\_\_\_\_.*

Notice that he has internalized a useful device—one that he can use not only to order his own thoughts, but to package his thoughts for delivery to a listener or reader.

The lessons we've listed here are by no means a complete list of what children learn from high-quality reading. But they give a pretty good idea of the kinds of experiences that 1) tend to be unique to reading and 2) lead directly to writing tools or skills.

## Part 2: Choosing Good Books

IN THIS NEXT PART of the series, our fundamental premise is that, during this reading phase of our kids' writing training, not all reading and not all books are created equal; some do a far better job than others of equipping our kids to write. So part of our objective here is to help parents distinguish such books from the mass of children's literature. But we've decided to treat the whole subject of choosing books more broadly—help you sort through your kids' myriad reading choices and do so without focusing narrowly on teaching your kids to write. After all, who shops for kids' reading material—whether in the library or the bookstore—with just their kids' *writing* in mind?

Now when it comes to choosing books for your kids, we're going to promote a discriminating palate. But we don't want to overstate our case here: *any reading at all is better than none*. What is of paramount importance is that your child spend a large chunk of each day reading *something*—even if it's only comic books or the backs of cereal boxes. And a word of caution: you must take all our recommendations with a grain of salt, factor in the extent to which our views are skewed by personal preference. We're doing our best, in other words, to identify guidelines and principles that have general validity and broad application; but despite our best efforts, our personal taste (and in some cases our distaste) keeps creeping in, affecting not just the kinds of books we recommend, but our emphasis, the examples we choose, etc. So we ask that you consider how *you* would apply whatever principle we're discussing, given *your* taste and preferences.

### A REALLY BAD BOOK

Let's start by examining a bad book. We'll consider one of our own poor choices: *Toy Story*, a book based on the Disney movie. We purchased this book some years ago at Borders, and our thoughts probably ran something like this:

*The kids loved that movie; this book has all the same characters, same artwork... and it is, after all, a book rather than a movie—better to have them reading than sitting in front of the tube...*

In other words, we had no clear standards or criteria; we bought this book because, well, *it seemed like a good idea at the time*. —Big mistake. We're going to take a moment to examine in detail the sheer awfulness of this book, and if you already knew that it was a bad book, please bear with us: examining precisely why a book fails can shed light on what makes a good book wonderful.

First, such a book is ill-conceived: its highest aim is to duplicate the movie. But we already have a far superior duplicate of the movie, an *exact* duplicate, i.e., the video or DVD; so who needs the book?

Second, the book contains no original artwork; it simply borrows stills from the movie, and on cheap paper the colors seem dingy, even muddy—all the bright light and sharp imagery that distinguished the movie's computer-generated artwork are gone.

Even worse is the quality of the prose. Here's a sample, and to get the full effect, you must imagine the artwork that accompanies this passage: a two-page spread shows Buzz Lightyear in a frilly apron and lady's hat, his arm outstretched and holding a teacup—a human hand extends a teapot...

Woody ran into a closet, but Buzz heard star command calling him at last. Delighted, he made his way toward the sound. "Calling Buzz Lightyear! Come in,

Buzz Lightyear! This is star command!"

Buzz was ecstatic—until he also heard the TV announcer say, "Yes, kids, Buzz Lightyear. The world's greatest superhero is now the world's greatest toy!" Woody was right. Buzz was just a toy.

Heartbroken, Buzz tried to prove the TV commercial wrong. He made his way up the stairs and tried to fly! He fell flat on his back and broke off his arm. That's when Sid's sister, Hannah, found him and invited him to a tea party for her dolls.

This text, you will notice, presents the events of the movie as a laundry list; events are fired at us the way a machine gun fires bullets. A pivotal moment in the story—Buzz's dumbfounding realization that he's not a real astronaut—is reduced to eight words: *Woody was right. Buzz was just a toy.* The artwork, moreover, illustrates only the last half of the final sentence: ... *and invited him to a tea party for her dolls.* In this narrative, you see, the job of the text is simply to *bridge the gaps between the stills.*

As storytelling, this is simply inept. It is, however, a recipe for turning out a book cheaply, and once you've got the movie, the formula is easily repeated. So we should not be surprised that Disney has created THE MOUSEWORKS CLASSICS COLLECTION, and it includes *Aladdin*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Aristocats*, and so on right through the entire alphabet of Disney animation. Big profits, no doubt; lousy books. And unfortunately, the marketplace is filled with such books: well-meaning librarians stock our library shelves with books like these; loving friends and relatives are liable to thrust such books into your children's hands.

## A CALL FOR CLEAR STANDARDS

To guard against poor choices in general, we parents can define clear standards for our kids' reading. We propose three sets of factors—considerations useful for identifying good books:

- 1) content
- 2) appearance
- 3) high-quality prose

### 1) CONTENT

We suggest that, when seeking good books, you look for *good content*, which we define as follows:

— **Good content is challenging.** Not always, of course; in fact, we recommend that your child read, on her own, books that can be read for sheer pleasure, with little effort. But reading with an adult is different. In our family, Roy reads to the kids each night before bed; Diane reads to them at various points during the day, as their schedule permits. And when reading with an adult, your children can and should experience books that are a bit of a stretch.

Among our son's favorite books, for example, is a set of three beautifully illustrated books that we happened upon on Amazon.com: *Gilgamesh the King*, *The Revenge of Ishtar*, and *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh*. These three books by Ludmila Zeman are a retelling for children of the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh—a story recorded on clay tablets around 3000 B.C. The characters' names are foreign-sounding—*Gilgamesh*, *Enkidu*, *Shamhat*, *Siduri*—and the events are strange: *The sky opened and Ishtar came back in revenge. She had harnessed the Bull of Heaven, the monstrous beast of the skies, and she rode it to Uruk...*

Our son first read these books at bedtime, with his father, when he was six, and the effort was almost instantly rewarded. The epic of Gilgamesh, it turns out, is one exciting adventure after another, and this ancient tale—which predates the Old Testament—reverberates with echoes of other, later stories. Imagine our son's surprise when he read the following: *I was told to build a great ark and to gather into it my family and each kind of animal and plant. As soon as I finished, the storm came. For six days and seven nights it rained, and the earth was*

*flooded. Only my boat survived. When the rain stopped and the water subsided, it came to rest on a mountain...* Our son practically shouted: “It’s just like NOAH!”

When well chosen, challenging books and stories can teach your child, even at an early age, a critical lesson: an investment of effort is often rewarded, and the best books—like many of the best experiences in life—often require such investments.

Sometimes, of course, we miscalculate—we start a book that is too far above our child’s level. The good news is that when the stretch is too great, you can instantly tell: your children’s eyes will glaze over; they’ll ask to read something else, etc. At such times it’s critical, in our view, that you not press forward. Just put it aside. You don’t actually need to force anything on your kids. When you find the right measure of challenge, they will be stimulated and rise to the occasion.

- **Good content is age-appropriate.** It’s not uncommon to see homeschooled children who, at the age of five or six, are reading at a fifth-grade level, and reading voraciously. A word of caution to all parents of such children: be certain that what the child reads is appropriate for his or her *emotional* level. Some kids’ novels, for instance, appear to hold in high regard child-characters with smart-aleck attitudes toward all grown-ups—i.e., they promote a kind of arrogance. Such books can easily, though perhaps inadvertently, encourage disobedience, disrespect, deception, or dishonesty in your kids.

If your kids need reading that is more challenging than most books written at their grade level, there are plenty of alternatives—books that a precocious reader will find challenging but which will nonetheless preserve his or her innocence. Every book recommended in this article meets this standard.

- **Good content ends happily.** This issue is closely related to the previous one, but we’ve stubbed our toes on it often enough that we thought it warranted separate mention. We have on several occasions underestimated our child’s need to vicariously triumph at the end of every tale—the monsters or bad guys all vanquished, the heroes all exalted or rewarded, the innocent rescued, and the weak avenged.

What we’re talking about here is something that seems fundamental to the child’s peace of mind. Young children need to know, before they go to sleep at night, that all is right with the world, that God is in His heaven, and that good *always* triumphs over evil. Their reading should offer reassurance that such is the case—even if your own sense of the universe is that it’s a very mixed bag.

A recent book—*Killing Monsters*, by Gerard Jones—contends that much of the “pretend” violence so common among children plays an important role in their mental health and development; that much of childhood experience consists of feeling small and powerless, and it is important that, in their fantasies and play, they be free to experience the complete opposite: control, dominance, omnipotence. —Perhaps we should not be surprised if children are attracted to stories of triumph, repelled by tragic tales of disillusion and defeat.

- **Good content portrays heroes.** By “heroes” we don’t mean King Arthur and Superman. We have in mind characters who embody simultaneously two discrete qualities: 1) they inspire *empathy*, i.e., the child feels drawn to step into the character’s shoes; 2) they model desirable traits or behaviors—so much so that the child is moved to feelings of awe and admiration. The “Cam Jansen” mysteries, to take a modest example, portray a clever girl with a photographic memory and a stubborn streak—once she happens across a mystery, she won’t stop until she gets to the bottom of it. The child-reader identifies with her and, in the process, experiences perseverance.

Another example is *The Wind in the Willows*, and please bear with us here; we want to quote a lengthy passage that illustrates what we mean by “heroes.”

First, a bit of background for anyone not familiar with TWW: At the beginning of the book,

in a fit of spring fever, the Mole abandons his dark, underground home and, once in the bright spring air, meets the Water Rat, who takes him on a splendid adventure on the river. The Mole moves into Rat's home on the riverbank, and the two become fast friends, sharing many adventures. As time passes, Mole quite forgets his previous life underground. The passage quoted below takes place in mid-December, on a cold evening when the two are far from home and the snow already lies thick on the ground:

They plodded along steadily and silently, each of them thinking his own thoughts. The Mole's ran a good deal on supper, as it was pitch dark, and it was all strange country to him as far as he knew. The Rat was walking a little way ahead, his eyes fixed on the road in front of him, so he did not notice Mole when the summons reached him, and took him like an electric shock.

We have only the word "smell" for the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day. It was one of these mysterious fairy calls that suddenly reached Mole in the darkness, making him tingle through and through. He stopped dead in his tracks, his nose searching hither and thither.

Home! That was what they meant, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way! Why, it must be quite close by him at that moment, his old home he had forsaken when he first found the river! Since that bright morning he had hardly given it a thought. Shabby and poorly furnished, and yet his, the home he had made for himself, the home he had been so happy to get back to after his day's work. And the home was missing him, and wanted him back, and was telling him so, through his nose...

"Ratty!" he called. "Come back! I want you, quick!"

"O, *come* along, Mole!" replied the Rat, plodding along.

"Stop, Ratty!" pleaded the Mole. "You don't understand! It's my home, my old home! I've just come across the smell of it, and it's really quite close. Come back, Ratty! Please!"

The Rat was by this time very far ahead, too far to hear what the Mole was calling.

"We mustn't stop now!" he called back. "It's late, and the snow's coming on again, and I'm not sure of the way! And I want your nose, Mole, so come on, there's a good fellow!" And the Rat pressed on without waiting for an answer.

Poor Mole stood alone in the road, his heart torn asunder, a big sob gathering, somewhere low down inside him. Never for a moment did he dream of abandoning his friend. His old home pleaded, whispered...

*[They plod on a ways, then pause for a rest.]*

The Mole tried to control himself, for he felt it coming, the sob he had fought so long. Up and up, it forced its way to the air, and then another, and another, and others thick and fast; till poor Mole at last gave up the struggle, and cried helplessly, now that he knew it was all over and he had lost what he could hardly be said to have found.

The Rat did not dare to speak for a while. At last he said, "What is it, old fellow? Whatever can be the matter?"

Mole found it difficult to get any words out. "I know it's a — shabby, little place," he sobbed at last: "not like — your cozy quarters — or Toad's beautiful hall — or Badger's great house — but it was my own little home — and I was fond of it — and then I smelt it suddenly — on the road, when I called and you wouldn't listen, Rat. We might have just gone and had one look at it — but you wouldn't turn back, you wouldn't!"

The Rat stared in front of him, saying nothing. After a time he muttered, "What a *pig* I have been! A *pig* — that's me!" Then he rose, and, remarking, "Well, we'd better be getting on!" set off up the road again, back the way they had come.

"Wherever are you (hic) going to, Ratty?" cried the Mole.

"We're going to find that home of yours, old fellow," replied the Rat pleasantly.

Here is a story replete with what we're calling "heroes"—characters a child can empathize with and admire, and whose behavior a child can emulate. The success of this passage is due, in part, to the fact that a child can empathize with *both* heroes—the one whose feelings have

been trampled and the one who did the trampling. And the story leaves the child with a sense that, when you've hurt someone you love, you *make it right*.

That's good content.

- **Good content radiates love.** It is no accident that many of the best children's books began life as stories created by parents for their own children: Kipling's *Just So Stories*, *Peter Pan*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Hobbit*, etc. A spirit of love imbues such books—love both of the characters in the story and of the child who's reading it. (And notice the vast gulf that separates such books from the likes of the feckless *Toy Story*.) Any child immersed in such books can hardly escape being nourished by the experience.

## 2) APPEARANCE

You've probably already noticed that the way a book *looks*—its cover, the illustrations, even the choice of typeface—can play a big role in whether a child takes to it. Of course these aspects are to some extent matters of taste and personal preference—but only to a certain extent. With young children, in particular, some kinds of artwork seem to be more engaging than others, and that's what we'd like to focus on here: the specific aspects of appearance that seem to transcend individual taste.

Let's note first of all that the role of appearance evolves with age—in other words, a toddler's needs are not the same as a nine-year-old's. Here's our take on what those needs are and the implications for parents when choosing books:

### For younger children

For pre-literate toddlers to beginning readers, the illustrations are often the siren song that either lures them into the story or fails to do so. What's more, our toddlers do “read” in a sense; they read the pictures. If we could film the face of a three-year-old being read a bedtime story, what we would see on that child's face is intense scrutiny—close examination of the pictures to wring from them every drop of information they hold. This activity, of course, is a near relative of reading words.

So when we open a book in a library or bookstore, what should we parents seek, when it comes to a book's appearance? What should we be looking for? The general method we would recommend to all parents: Notice which books your younger children are drawn to—the books they return to again and again. Then ask, *What do the illustrations in all these books have in common?*

Whatever those things are, they're working—i.e., they make books enticing to young ones—so whatever qualities they are, you should seek more books with those kinds of illustrations.

Here are some considerations that we have noticed in our own family:

- **Familiar worlds.** We notice in our own children that, when they're young, they're immediately engaged by things they've already encountered in their own worlds: *What are those little bears doing? They're playing in the SNOW!!! ... What are those two little pigs doing? Why, they're lying in a hammock, reading books, and sipping lemonade—just like we did last summer, remember?... What's Papa Bear doing? He's raking leaves...* By contrast, our daughter finds far less compelling a brightly colored book featuring Spider, a computer-generated but friendly-looking creature who spends the entire book trying to persuade insects—ants, bees, ladybugs—to come to tea in her web. They don't trust her, you see. But it all seems to leave our daughter cold—too far outside her two- to three-year-old world.
- **Quantity.** For younger readers, the more artwork the better. Put another way, anything referred to in the text should be depicted in the illustrations. This may seem an obvious point, but remember the example of *Toy Story*, where—for younger readers, at any rate—the proportions are all out of whack: in that book a page of text may refer to a dizzying number of events, whereas the illustration depicts just one. That approach does not work for younger

readers, who should be able to get the essence of the story *from the pictures alone*. One of our daughter's current favorites, for instance, is a book called *Oliver Finds His Way*, in which a number of two-page spreads have only a word or two of text—like, *Roar-r-r-r-r!*

Remember: *they read the pictures*.

- **Literal vs. oblique.** Younger readers, we suspect, enjoy and benefit most from *literal depiction* of the things the book refers to.

Over the last twenty years or so we have seen a growing trend: illustrators who favor techniques they themselves seem to find pleasing or clever—like cutting out pieces of paper with different colors and texture and pasting them into a shape that calls to mind, say, a porcupine that just happens to be blue. Other illustrators use a style that vaguely recalls a child's drawing, with simple figures drawn very simply, not much beyond stick figures. Others may use a geometric style, with everything composed of simple geometric shapes—all corners and angles and circles...

What all such techniques have in common is that they work by making *oblique* references to things that already exist in the reader's mind: the illustrator creates a fat purple animal with short legs and rectangular white tusks, and we think, *Hippopotamus*. The problem, for younger readers, is that they may have no direct experience of the thing being referred to—a porcupine or hippopotamus—and for them, the reference therefore has no meaning.

What's most curious about this trend in children's illustration is that such books seem deliberately targeted to *younger* readers. Books for older kids—nine-, ten-, or twelve-year-olds—if they have illustrations at all, usually seem to favor a more realistic or *literal* approach.

At any rate, we suspect that the younger the reader the more literal the method of illustration should be. Consider our young daughter, who is currently drawn to a version of “Snow White” lavishly illustrated with large paintings: each has great depth and a wealth of detail. We've seen our two-and-a-half-year-old stare at a single page for a couple of minutes, drinking in the realistic-looking details. A forest scene, for instance, includes not just Snow White and the huntsman who's supposed to get rid of her, but an impossible audience of animals: several rabbits, two squirrels, a deer, a couple of mice, a bullfrog—and that's just the *animals*. The clothing of the human characters, for example, is richly detailed, right down to the trim on Snow White's dress (sage-colored with an oak-leaf pattern). Such an illustration is food for a young mind—and good for at least a five-minute conversation: *What's that?* “Frog,” she says. *Do you see any mice?* “There!” she says, touching them with her finger—you know the routine.

- **Subtle palettes.** Some illustrators seem to think that children up to age eight or nine can't process anything but the simplest color palette—primary red, blue, and yellow. We suspect that by age two (perhaps even earlier), many kids are ready for more color and more subtle palettes. The book we mentioned above, *Oliver Finds His Way*, has a muted, autumnal palette that, in combination with the story, characters, etc., proved irresistible to our two-and-a-half-year-old. It is also, by the way, quite beautiful.
- **Beauty.** We've been circling this one for a while now, so here it is: some children's books are ugly. Children quite young can respond to beauty, and it is never too soon to begin their exposure to it.

### For older children

Good illustrations seem to play an altogether different role for older kids. They can portray places and events of which a six-year-old—due to lack of experience or knowledge—may be incapable of forming any image. If you have no experience of Nepal, for example, you literally can't “picture” it when reading a Nepalese folk tale—or rather, the visuals you fabricate may have no relation to the things being described. Similarly, if you have no experience of Sumerians or

Akkadians, you might need an assist when it comes to visualizing events taking place in ancient Mesopotamia.

Good illustrations, in other words, make it possible for older children—children who are already reading well—to venture beyond their immediate experience and surroundings: beyond the familiar, intimate worlds depicted in their toddler books, beyond what they have seen on television or in movies, and beyond the Americana and suburbia of *Toy Story*.

For new readers, therefore, a book's appearance and artwork can be just as important as for toddlers, just in a different way. Here's a list of qualities we feel are worth seeking:

- **Foreign worlds, ancient times, and different cultures.** Fine illustrations can render another place or time accessible to a young mind and make far easier the task of challenging your child (see the point under CONTENT above, “—*is challenging.*”). So the further from common experience a book ventures, the more you should look for rich illustration.

The books on Gilgamesh that we mentioned earlier are a good example: they have richly detailed illustrations in the flattened, two-dimensional style of ancient Assyrian or Sumerian bas-relief carvings, complete with cuneiform borders. They therefore tell an epic adventure story while, at the same time, acquainting the reader with the aesthetic of an ancient place and time—a remarkable achievement.

Another good example is Rosemary Sutcliff's retelling of *The Odyssey*, called *The Wanderings of Odysseus*. The illustrations are by Alan Lee—the artist responsible for much of the look and detail in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies. In conjunction with Sutcliff's prose, Lee's illustrations make the adventures of Odysseus accessible even to quite young readers. A word of warning, however: the events depicted are often brutal, shockingly so, and things do not always go well for Odysseus and his men.

- **Alternative worlds.** Good illustrations seize the imagination: they are detailed and cohesive enough to make up a complete, self-contained world—one that a child can enter and dwell in for a time.

An example: illustrations of *The Wind in the Willows*—not the famous ones by Ernest Shepherd, but a more recent version, by Inga Moore. In her version the English countryside and animal homes are rendered with such detail, often in large two-page spreads, and with such love, that it is easy to gaze for minutes at a single drawing.

### 3) HIGH-QUALITY PROSE

In this section we're going to look closely at the quality of the prose that distinguishes the best books. But first, we'd like to emphasize what seems to us a key practice: reading aloud to your older children—your eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds.

**An endangered ritual.** We're wondering whether many parents aren't abandoning this nightly ritual far too soon—especially when younger children come along to compete for a parent's time and energy. You know the routine: by the end of the day Mom is exhausted and, desperately needing a break, turns to face the kitchen and all the mess from dinner. Dad is focused on herding the kids out of the tub and into pajamas. The youngest child needs a story, and by the time the young one's story has drawn to a close and the lights are out, the temptation to let the older kids settle themselves, read to themselves or whatever, may be overwhelming—with Mom and Dad both thinking, *Can't I sit down for just a minute...?*

Whatever the sacrifices, daily readings have uncommon benefits for your older children—rewards difficult to reap by any other means. First, they maintain and deepen vital bonds between parents and their children. Second, older children will tackle readings with their parents' assistance that, left to their own devices, they might never touch. Children can be remarkably close-minded, rejecting out of hand—and for the most superficial reasons—a book or subject they

find difficult to relate to. With a little gentle prodding *plus* a parent's participation, they can overcome such resistance and discover new worlds.

In this section, we will assume that parents reading this article will indeed make time—if not at bedtime, then at some other time—for daily readings. And we want to emphasize *daily*: the practice must be a daily occurrence for it to have the desired effects. And if, from time to time, *both* parents can participate, all the better: both parents' setting aside that time just serves to reinforce the importance and value of the daily ritual.

**The quality of the prose.** The aspect of books that we're addressing in this section—high-quality prose—is especially important to our broader topic: teaching your kids to *write*. You should look for prose that models the very qualities you want your children to aim for in their own writing.

Here are the qualities you should look for, and when you find them in a writer, you should try to get your hands on more books by the same writer:

- **Precision.** The best writers love words and use words in an exacting manner: their words don't take you next door to the intended meaning; they hit the nail on the head—no matter how subtle the thing they're getting at, no matter how difficult to articulate. Recall the passage we quoted earlier from *The Wind in the Willows*, in which Kenneth Grahame embarks on a discussion of the Mole's sense of smell:

We have only the word "smell" for the whole range of delicate thrills which murmur in the nose of the animal night and day...

It's a splendid passage, and when you read such writing, you often have the feeling, *Yes, that's exactly right; that's it precisely...*

- **Sense of character.** The best writers "see" their characters—not just their strengths and weaknesses, but their quirks, their peculiar tastes and turns of mind or speech, and their hearts. By representing their characters in prose, the best writers not only teach us to "see" what they see, but give us a language for communicating about such things—a language for communicating about *people*.

Consider a passage from Dick King-Smith's *The Water Horse*, in which two Scottish children and their grumpy grandfather—whom the children call "Grumble"—discover a baby sea monster. At this point, the water horse is swimming in their bathtub, a wee thing not even a day old, and they're trying to decide on an appropriate name for him:

Between them, in the next few minutes, they managed to suggest a host of names, but no one approved of anyone else's choices. Kirstie liked the kind of names that might have suited a real horse or pony—Starlight, Bonnieboy, Surefoot, Trusty, and Thunderer. Grumble favored good Scottish family names such as Stuart and Sinclair, Mackenzie, McGregor, and Tullibane. Angus chose fierce, aggressive names suitable for the enormous monster that he thought the creature would one day be, names like Skullcruncher, Superjaws, Backbreaker, Cowkiller, and Drinkblood.

The author, of course, with three lists of possible names for a baby sea monster, has got it exactly right—i.e., the personalities of all three characters. These are precisely the names each would have come up with.

The best writers see their characters so clearly that the characters' personalities ooze from every crevice. The details of the story hold the characters the way a sponge holds water.

- **A clear voice.** The best writers speak with a clear "voice"—one that you hear in your head as you read. The voice will vary, of course, from one author to the next—even one book to the next. But the common feature of all strong "voices" is the feeling of relationship, the sense that the writer is speaking directly to you, one human being to another. You'll notice such voices

in all the passages we've quoted in this article, save the one from *Toy Story*.

This is an especially important quality for us parents to seek in books for our children, because such writers are modeling a behavior key to our children's attempts at writing; finding their "voice" in written English is a key milestone. Here's a twelve-year-old writing a review on Amazon.com:

Want a riveting historical-fiction novel with a plot that is better than most? If so, *The Silver Branch* is a book for you. Set in Roman Britain, over a century after the first book in the series, *The Eagle of the Ninth*, the book paints a picture of the life of two Romans, who seek to overthrow a tyrannical emperor who has separated himself, and Britain, from Rome. Rosemary Sutcliff has indeed woven a story whose plot is exceedingly diverse and well thought-out. The book gives the reader a gripping plot in which the reader is given a picture of the Roman world. The book paints a vivid picture of a Roman town, Legion, a gladiator fight, and the Roman's enemies, the Saxon barbarians. Rosemary Sutcliff has the gift of being able to write very good historical novels.

This young writer has learned to express himself the way we all learn—through imitation. Notice the clichés: *a riveting... novel; a gripping plot; a vivid picture*. The point is not to criticize this young man but to commend him—he's exactly where he should be at twelve, absorbing the language like a sponge. And notice: no one *speaks* like this—a gripping plot, a riveting novel; he's using the clichés of *written* English. More important, he's already found his *voice* in that language.

### **“LIVING” BOOKS**

One of the pioneers of education, Charlotte Mason, emphasized the importance of what she called “living” books—stories, biographies, first-person accounts—books, in other words, that are obviously written by a single author who either writes from a personal perspective or is personally engaged with—passionate about—his or her subject.

A “dead” book, by contrast, might be your geography text from seventh grade, or your U.S. history text from eighth grade—remember? Those books that made fascinating events seem dry as dust. Books that could somehow take the experience of, say, crossing the ocean in a leaky sailing vessel, enduring storms and scurvy, hunger and thirst, mutiny, piracy—just imagine the *smells* on the *Mayflower*—and transform it all into prose as dull as dishwater, snapshots taken from 90,000 feet, drained of compelling detail, drained of sounds or tastes or feelings, drained of anything that an interest group or school board somewhere might find objectionable.

Such books are death to the spirits of young children. Give them stories, stories, stories; but above all, give them a human *voice*.

## Part 3: Principles of Writing Instruction

IN THIS NEXT PART we will tackle the *mechanics* of teaching your child to write. Our intention here is not to give a complete tutorial in the subject, but to give parents insight into the particular nature of this challenge. We may comment at various points on particular exercises or programs of instruction, but it is not our intention to review them all and recommend one. Our objective here, rather, is to equip parents with everything they need to gauge *for themselves* the quality of a particular program—distinguish constructive exercises from those that may be a waste of time and find the approach that’s exactly right for their child.

Toward that end, we will outline here what seem to us immutable principles of writing instruction—truths about writing that are valid not just for our child or your child, but for all children. Here’s the first principle:

### 1. WRITING IS NOT A SINGLE TASK OR SKILL.

When you look at a piece of good writing—actually see it lying on the page—it’s easy to think of it as a single product, easy to think of it as something produced in a single, inspired outpouring. That’s an illusion. Writing is not a single activity; it is, rather, *dozens* of activities, all interwoven. The decisions involved in producing a single piece of writing may number in the hundreds, thousands, even hundreds of thousands, depending on the length of the piece. Those decisions vary widely in kind and magnitude, encompassing everything from *What’s my topic?* and *What points should I make?* to *What’s another word for “jumble together”?* and *Does a period go inside or outside the quotation marks?*

Writing is really a bit of a miracle: the more you reflect on what goes into it, the more amazing it seems that anyone is able to do it at all. The fact is, to produce writing, a child must develop three discrete capacities:

- 1) **expression**—the ability to string written words together into coherent thoughts;
- 2) **grammar**—the ability to produce correctly punctuated sentences, correctly spelled words, and so on;
- 3) **content**—something to say.

In many writing programs and discussions of writing, these challenges are commingled, and in a sense, such commingling is completely understandable. After all, when we write, we move in a completely fluid fashion from one type of activity to another, without even noticing that that’s what we’re doing. Yet the fact remains that these are discrete abilities: having correct *grammar* in no way guarantees that you’ll *have something to say*—they’re completely separate challenges. Similarly, you may *have something to say* without necessarily being *able to find the words* to give expression to it; *correct spelling* won’t make your *train of thought clear*, and so on.

### 2. READING IS THE FOUNDATION.

We began this series of articles by pointing out the relationship between reading and writing: we get our foundation in the three capacities mentioned above not from writing lessons or classroom exercises, but from reading. Another way of looking at it: written English is akin to a second language, and we acquire that language just as we acquire any second language: through consistent exposure to it.

This truth has a number of important consequences or implications. To begin with, the fundamental ability to express oneself in writing can no more be acquired from workbook exercises than fluent Spanish can be acquired from a textbook. Formal writing instruction—i.e.,

lessons and exercises—are useful only for refining, practicing, and extending a basic ability that must already be present.

What's more, young children have an extraordinary, sponge-like ability to acquire Written English—just as they can easily pick up a foreign language if it is in their environment. This facility for acquiring language is a genetic ability, a kind of window that opens in infancy and begins to close in adolescence. By the time we reach adulthood, that window has long since closed. This fact explains why learning Written English as an adult—i.e., if it was not acquired in childhood—requires years of intense intellectual toil.

### **3. WRITING IS UNRELATED TO HANDWRITING.**

The skill of handwriting is a challenge completely separate from any of the capacities described above, which are essentially mental challenges. Handwriting is a fine motor skill. It requires intense hand-eye coordination—essentially a matter of drawing—and for a child to draw letters correctly and legibly, the child's brain needs to develop certain neuro-pathways, which will only come with practice.

Even so, handwriting is often conflated with writing skill. A child who gets labeled a *reluctant writer* may, in truth, be simply struggling with the fine motor skills involved in drawing letters.

### **4. AS SOON AS YOUR CHILD BEGINS TO READ, SHE CAN BEGIN TO WRITE.**

The key is to separate *writing* from *handwriting*. We discovered early on that our son's writing ability was developing quickly while his handwriting progressed at a snail's pace. Fortunately, beginning when he was around five and a half, Diane began an activity they refer to as *narration*.<sup>2</sup> After he finished reading a book, Diane would ask our son to "write" a report, and he would basically dictate a report: they would sit together in front of the computer and, as he spoke what the book was about, she typed his words into the computer. She did minimal editing, limiting her contributions to capitalizing, punctuation, and so on, so that, to as great an extent as possible, the resulting documents were his words. A sample:

This story is about the ice mummy that was found in the coldest mountains in Austria called The Alps. One day hikers were hiking in the mountains, and they saw something that looked like a doll's head. What was it? Was it a man? They looked closer, and they quickly took a picture of it. It was an ice mummy.

As his reading became more sophisticated, his writing kept pace—even though his handwriting progressed relatively slowly.

### **5. IN THE BEGINNING, TEACH HANDWRITING SEPARATELY.**

Some children will master handwriting so quickly that its instruction can soon be merged with writing. But other children—like our son—may struggle with the fine-motor skill, and such children need to be allowed as much time as they require to master the manual challenges without being saddled with the additional challenge of writing—a challenge, remember, that is essentially mental in nature.

Now a few suggestions for the child who struggles with handwriting:

- *Find a program that works for you.* If one handwriting program isn't working, try another—approaches often vary widely from one program to the next. Some, for instance, skip printing

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<sup>2</sup> Here we're following the terminology of *The Well-Trained Mind*, by Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer, one of our favorite books on homeschooling.

altogether and teach cursive writing right off the bat; others use an italic handwriting model that has very little difference between print and cursive. There are also computer-based handwriting programs that enable you to print out traceable letters. With so many choices available, you should be able to find a good match for your child's needs and inclinations.

- *Go at the child's pace, but a little every day.* Perhaps a full sheet assignment is too much; do just half the page, or just one or two lines, but *do them every day*. There is an adage that goes something like, *If you want to acquire knowledge, visit the subject on a regular basis; but when you want to acquire a skill, practice every day.* We couldn't agree more.
- *Be encouraging.* Our son was getting discouraged and began to say derogatory things about his handwriting, like, "I'm not good at this," and "I'll never be able to do that." This kind of negativity must be addressed in some fashion; it can impede a child's ability to improve, become self-fulfilling prophecy. Such statements suggested to Diane that a successful approach would have two discrete components: one developmental—which she tackled simply by doing appropriate lessons every single day—the other psychological. She tackled the psychological part by pointing out small improvements: *Notice the loop on this 'p'? It's perfect! It looks just like the example! Or: Let's turn back and look at how you drew this letter a few months ago... You see, your letters are getting smaller and straighter.* When a big improvement is obvious, she'll tell our son, *You have beautiful handwriting!*

Even children who are not struggling need to hear such words of encouragement. Be specific in your praise, and never skip a day without finding something that your child is doing right.

- *Take time to train the child's eye.* There are two parts to mastering handwriting: the ability to *draw* the letters, which is a manual motor skill, and *perceiving* the desired shapes—which is a visual skill, a matter of actually *seeing* the subtle demands of spacing, size, and position that constitute the goal. If your child has poor handwriting, it is quite possible that he or she has the manual dexterity to draw the letters but does not yet *see* how they should look.

Take lower-case *p*: your child may be making it too big or too narrow, or it may be standing on the baseline so that each *p* looks like a capital *P*. In such a case you may need to focus on training your child's eye, i.e., train your child to perceive the different sizes, locations, and spacing of the letter. It is quite possible, for instance, for a child simply *not to have noticed* that a lower-case *b* is as tall as a capital *B*, or that a lower-case *y* dangles its tail below the baseline.

With our son we began to see marked improvement when Diane began taking the time each day to point out such differences—actually sitting with him and coaching him on *every single letter*.

**Typing.** Just a word about learning to type: These days more and more parents are teaching their children to type as an alternative to good penmanship. Here's our two cents on the matter: children today do need to learn to type, and they can be taught from an early age—there is now excellent software on the market that makes typing into a kids' game.

At the same time, there's currently no substitute for good penmanship. Like it or not, there will always be times that a keyboard is not available, and every person needs the ability to take notes, write a personal note or card, brainstorm a few ideas on a napkin, jot down a grocery list, fill out a banking deposit slip, and so on.

## 6. WRITING EXERCISES SHOULD BE REAL.

Writing workbooks often strike us as phony—chock-full of ill-conceived activities, exercises little better than busy-work, assignments that seem deadening to the spirit of a child. We're left wondering how many of these activities were originally conceived for classroom work rather than

one-on-one teaching. Beware: such exercises can do worse than waste your child's time; they can kill the natural exuberance children have for storytelling and for sharing things they've learned. Such exercises can make writing seem without purpose, an impersonal and joyless chore.

**What to avoid.** When looking at writing programs and workbooks, you should avoid exercises like the following:

- **Write a four-sentence descriptive paragraph... or: Write a four-sentence narrative paragraph...** Academics have a fondness for terminology that is often at odds with your child's actual needs. Despite what you may find in writing workbooks, rest at ease: you needn't torture your eight-year-old with distinctions between *descriptive* prose as opposed to *narrative*, or the difference between an *expository report* and an *essay*. Emphasis on this kind of nomenclature is often a pointless distraction, and producing different modes on command has nothing to do with being able to write effectively.

In case you're wondering when it is appropriate to introduce such distinctions, we'd suggest that at some point, when it seems appropriate, you introduce your child to *fiction* versus *non-fiction*. And once your teenagers have read hundreds of news articles, magazine articles, newspaper editorials and editorial columns, literary essays, memoirs, and so on, then you can ask them to notice useful distinctions: who seems to be gathering and reporting objective facts, and who is offering an interpretation, analysis, or opinion? You can point out things like: *This type of paper, which involves factual research, is referred to as a report; this other piece, in which the writer weighs the pros and cons of the death penalty, is referred to as an essay.*

- **Write a paragraph using these fifteen vocabulary words...** The purpose of an assignment like this one is to exercise the new vocabulary words, and it treats writing as an utterly pointless chore. The exercise itself is a recipe for mediocrity: more often than not, the words listed have nothing to do with one another in meaning, and you'd have to be a literary genius to make a compelling story or coherent essay using them.
- **Look at this picture and describe what you see in complete sentences.** Such assignments are a good example of busy-work: *Just make them write a bunch of words...* Granted, there may be a program somewhere out there in which the pictures are rich, engaging, thought-provoking, etc., but the ones we've seen were either cheaply produced black-&-white photos or drawings with nothing to recommend them.
- **Answer these questions and put them into a paragraph.** What would you come up with in answer to questions like the following: *What kinds of flowers bloom in the spring? What has blossoms besides flowers? What else happens in the spring?* —You might come up with something like this:

Daffodils bloom in the spring. The fruit trees have blossoms, too. The birds sing, and the farmers plant corn and other seeds.

In the summer it gets hot. The mosquitoes come out. The tomatoes get ripe in our garden.

The autumn leaves are yellow and red. Then they turn brown and fall to the ground. The farmer harvests the corn and pumpkins...

This is the most joyless kind of prose—not at all like what a child can produce when he or she really has something to say and is finding her voice in writing. At best this kind of exercise can be used to practice handwriting, but even then, we can imagine a far better use of the child's time.

- **Write three sentences each day in this writing journal; we will check your work at the end of the week...** This assignment was conceived with good intentions. The instructor had two

premises: first, that by writing every day, the child will develop the habit of writing; second, with assignments that are short and open-ended, the child will see how effortless writing can be. But for a child to flourish with such an assignment, he or she must already be a strong writer in every sense: 1) handwriting is easy; 2) the child expresses thoughts effortlessly; and 3) she has plenty to say about her day. If the child falls short in any of these capacities, such an assignment can turn into a demoralizing chore.

There's a lesson here, and it's something like this: *Fit the exercise to the child.* With writing instruction, in other words, one size seldom fits all.

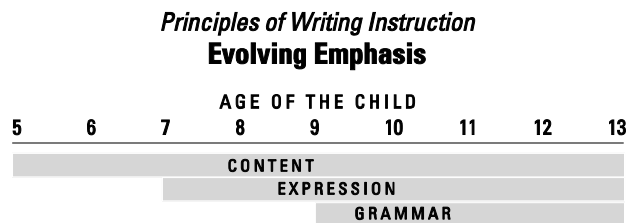
## 7. IN TEACHING WRITING, YOUR EMPHASIS MUST EVOLVE WITH THE CHILD.

Earlier we made the point that writing is not a single skill, but rather, a host of skills, all intertwined. We defined three capacities indispensable to writing:

1. **Content**—having something to say;
2. **Expression**—the ability to string written words together into coherent thoughts;
3. **Grammar**—the ability to produce correctly punctuated sentences, correctly spelled words, and so on.

Our point here is that parents must emphasize certain capacities at particular stages in the child's development. Emphasizing *Grammar* too soon, for instance, may be a common error among homeschoolers, and pushing a child to write (*Expression*) when he or she has little to say (*Content*) has all sorts of unintended—and negative—consequences.

We recommend moving in the sequence shown here (ages are crudely approximated<sup>3</sup>): start by emphasizing *content*; gradually transition to an emphasis on *expression*; and emphasize *grammar* at a still later stage. Exactly when you shift from one phase to another, of course, is a key judgment call—one that parents can make only by looking at their child.



Three additional points about this approach:

- **Rigidity doesn't work.** This approach is best thought of as evolutionary—it evolves with your child. It is not rigid: when we say to save grammar for the final stage, we don't mean that parents should fear teaching their seven-year-old what a noun is. It's simply a matter of emphasis, what you emphasize at each stage.
- **This approach may not be for everyone.** The program outlined below is not a quick fix. It does not treat writing as a subject, like the solar system, that you take up in September and complete in October. Nor is it a limited educational intervention—like a workbook you purchase, or a course you sign your child up for. This approach takes years to complete, and it's intended to be completely integrated with the rest of your curriculum.
- **It's all about inputs.** Teaching your child to write is an endeavor that requires time and years of patience. It is akin to cultivating an apple orchard: plant seeds at the right time; supply plenty of water and the right nutrients; check the soil periodically; safeguard against insects...

<sup>3</sup> Also, this chart might seem to suggest that writing instruction draws to a close around age 13; the reality, of course, is you can stop trying to improve your writing around age 70.

The point is that as long as you provide the right inputs at the right times, you can rest at ease, certain in the knowledge that the child will eventually produce the fruit that it is in his nature to produce, i.e., good writing.

The remainder of this article spells out in detail what we have in mind.

### **Phase 1: CONTENT**

In the early stages of your child's development, don't even worry about writing, or what we're calling *Expression*. In the early stages just expose the child to *Content*: lots and lots of stories, lots and lots of information—fairy tales, dinosaurs, basic astronomy, Greek myths, Confucius, the Revolutionary War, whales and sharks, ancient Egypt, stone-age tools, basic geology, cave paintings, colonial America, King Arthur's court, the Vikings... The point is to fill your children's world with good books, so that, from an early age, their primary method of acquiring information is *reading*.

In our homeschooling group we have observed a number of children who have been supported in just this kind of wide and voracious reading, and what we have found is that such children have lots of interesting and cogent things to say—*Content*, in other words, is not a problem. To illustrate, consider a conversation that our son's music teacher recounted to us—a conversation in which she had mentioned to our seven-year-old that it was the anniversary of Bach's birthday; Bach was born in 1685, died in 1750. At the mention of 1750, our son asked whether she knew that in 1775 the battle of Lexington and Concord took place (free association being one of his many talents). The teacher, being Scottish, not American, allowed as how she didn't know very much about that subject, so our son proceeded to explain to her the principal events of the American Revolution, moving from Paul Revere to the Shot Heard 'Round the World, the Declaration of Independence, the Battle of Trenton, and so on. A short while later they were discussing Tchaikovsky, and she mentioned the 1812 Overture. Our son asked whether she knew that Francis Scott Key wrote our national anthem during the War of 1812. Again, she allowed as how she didn't know that, and our son proceeded to explain to her the principal causes of the War of 1812, how the British raided Washington and burned the White House, how Francis Scott Key came to be on a British ship from which he could watch the bombardment of Fort McHenry, etc., etc. —The teacher told Diane that she wanted to come to our house to see how we managed to teach so much history to such a young child. Diane had to explain that, in point of fact, we weren't teaching him any American history at all; at this stage the focus of his history lessons has been entirely on *ancient* times—Greece, Rome, Egypt, Mesopotamia, etc. All the American stuff he has been reading *on his own*.

The point, of course, is that we have made books available to him and encouraged his interests—whatever they might be. And children who are supported in this way will never be at a loss for something to say.

**Narration.** Writing can be gently introduced through the activity we called “narration”—the child dictates to the parent an account of something he or she has just read. With this form of writing, the child needn't have any handwriting skill at all and needn't be concerned about punctuation or capitalization (both of which the parent provides).

In the beginning the child's narrations may be very brief, just a couple of sentences. Length is no cause for concern at this stage because we're just getting the child acquainted with the activity. Treat writing as a matter of routine: *After we read something, we write about it. We answer questions like, What was that story about? Who was Alexander the Great? What do we know about Saturn?* Our suggestion is that you begin narration with the child's first substantive reading, and then make it a regular part of your homeschooling. Good candidates for narration include stories, myths, history lessons, and science lessons.

Notice the advantages of this approach:

- **Confidence-building.** Make narration a weekly or twice-weekly occurrence (we know parents who make it a daily activity!) and what you will find is that, from an early age, the child gets accustomed to producing a digest of whatever material he or she has ingested—gets accustomed, in other words, to producing *content*. This activity not only reinforces the reading; it engenders a kind of fearlessness, an *I-can-do-this* sense of comfort with the whole notion of producing writing.
- **No unreality.** Writing lessons conceived for use in schools often seem contrived because such a huge part of their focus is—of necessity—*providing content*, giving the kid something to write about. Given the size of the class, teachers must fear that certain children—who may know little and have read even less—may have nothing to say.

With the approach we're recommending, you shouldn't ever have to concoct anything of this nature.

A word of warning, however, about narration: Make certain that you, the child's scribe, treat the writing in every respect as the child's creation, insisting that the child read it over to see whether it is satisfactory, whether anything needs to be altered, added, or subtracted. Your goal should be that the child experiences complete ownership of every piece.

If you hijack the writing to make it better or make it read the way *you* would have written it, you not only defeat the purpose of the activity; you may damage your child's spirit and the whole way your child relates to writing. A child who is treated this way soon concludes that writing is not really about what he has to say, but about *guessing how Mommy wants it done*—an impossible task, essentially a matter of mind-reading—and the child, as a result, will simply freeze up.

**Other preliminary writing exercises.** During the *Content* phase it is important that you get your child's handwriting up to speed, but do so without burdening the child with the demands of *Expression*. A few suggestions:

- **Copying.** As a handwriting (and preliminary writing) exercise, one of the best and simplest things you can do is have your child copy sentences in his own hand. In the beginning choose short (5-18 words), well-written sentences from good writers—Robert Frost, E.B. White, Kenneth Grahame. Just have your child copy the sentence (written neatly in *your* hand) onto appropriately lined paper.

*Another copying exercise:* Have your child copy in his own hand a narration you typed for him.

- **Dictation.** Once your child finds copying easy, move on to dictation. Again, begin with short, well-written sentences with simple words that the child will have no trouble spelling. Dictate in a slow manner while the child writes. Once complete, look over your child's work, praise whatever you can find that the child is doing correctly, and then make any needed corrections. Have the child re-write the sentence, if necessary, to correct any misspelled words or other errors. As the child gets more proficient, the dictations can get longer and more complex.

In addition to providing handwriting practice, dictation requires that your child develop a few skills not required in mere copying—skills like listening and recalling. Most important, the child must *conceive the words*, see them in her mind before they flow from her pencil—a skill so integral to writing that we scarcely notice that we do it. Dictation, moreover, is a precursor to note-taking—a skill one needs at a later stage in many kinds of information-gathering activities: listening to a lecture, attending a meeting, interviewing an expert to collect information, and so on.

The benefits of copying and dictation are many. First, both activities isolate the manual aspects of the skill without burdening the child with the task of *Expression*. (The child, in other words, is not required to 1) figure out what to say or 2) grope for the words with which to say it.) Second, both get the child's eye accustomed to producing in his own hand correct usage, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and so on.

## Phase 2: EXPRESSION

With time, your emphasis can shift to *Expression*—the child's ability to put her own thoughts into coherent written words and sentences. Your child's own development will naturally propel you to this phase: the narrations will get longer and more complicated, your own role in the production of narrations will diminish, and, as a result, your child will begin developing skills critical to *Expression*. For example:

- *narrative*—the ability to tell a story;
- *summary*—the ability to select the salient points from a body of information;
- *synthesis*—the ability to take information from a number of readings on a single topic and combine them into a single, cogent account.

The narration process will, at the same time, accomplish a number of other objectives. It will:

- enable your child to find her “voice” in written English;
- enable your child to recall what has been learned—narration helps move the information from short- to long-term memory;
- instill a sense of writing as a genuinely useful undertaking—the child can show her report to her grandmother and see that it *communicates* (Grandma understands what she's written and clearly sees what she has learned);
- paves the way for writing longer, more complicated reports (makes it all seem not that difficult).

Once your child enters the *Expression* phase, be prepared for a long stay. There is much to learn, and even if your child is ready for the *Grammar* phase, your emphasis on *Expression* should remain strong.

**Suggested approaches.** We have a couple of suggestions for the mechanics of easing into this phase:

- ***Integration with other subjects.*** Bear in mind that in the early phases writing is best treated not as a separate subject but rather as an adjunct to history, science, and literature studies. In our household we have followed a suggestion from *The Well-Trained Mind* and maintain separate notebooks to house our child's writing on each subject.
- ***Transition from handwriting to writing.*** Once handwriting is no longer an obstacle and the narrations flow out of your child with little effort, you can graduate from copying and dictation to the next level: simply continue the narrations, but instead of you typing, the child *writes*.
- ***Readiness for this phase.*** Some parents may wonder, *What if my child struggles with exactly this phase—struggles just to articulate her thoughts?* —If the writing isn't flowing, we recommend lingering a while longer in the *Content* phase, where the emphasis is on reading. Remember: it is only through reading that a child internalizes the forms, syntax, and vocabulary of Written English and, in the process, acquires the ability to produce complete thoughts in written words. To acquire this ability, some children may need more reading than others; some children may need only 500 hours of reading, some 5000, some even more. Be patient. Spend time yourself reading with the child. Invest time and, if necessary, money in finding first-rate books and stories.

Some parents may ask, *But what if my child is already ten years old?* —Even if your child is twelve or fourteen, if he is struggling to voice thoughts in written words, it is all the more important that he spend more time reading. Cutting back on electronic games and devices (television, Nintendo, etc.) may help, but only if the time freed up in this manner is spent in front of a book.

Remember, the key is that the child actually *reads*. By our estimate, as soon as your child can read on her own, she should move fairly quickly to spending at least 30 minutes each day in that activity, i.e., reading on her own. (In addition to that time, you and your spouse should both be reading books with the child.) Children eight and older should spend more than an hour each day reading on their own. If your child is twelve and still struggling to write, he should spend two or more hours every day reading in some fashion.

**Abstracting & organizing thoughts.** One of the most underestimated, least-talked-about aspects of writing can and should be introduced during this phase. It is the ability, first of all, to “see” unifying thoughts or ideas, and second, to put them in some kind of order. When encouraged, children can develop this ability quite early, but parents must first realize what it is and why it’s important. —Perhaps the easiest way to convey what we mean is to describe how we’ve encouraged this ability in our own child.

Not too long ago there was a book our son was quite taken with—*You Wouldn’t Want to Be a Roman Gladiator*, by John Malam. And when it came time to write a narration, Diane said to him, *Before we write this, what are the various topics we’re going to talk about?* He had read the book a couple of times, so he began to rattle them off: how the gladiators were trained; the food they ate; where they slept; what happened when they got punished; and finally, the games—the fighting itself...

While he spoke, Diane typed a series of headlines into a blank Word document, as shown at right. In the end, these headlines formed the body of the narration: for each one, our son composed a “mini-essay” on the topic, basically rattling off the various things he’d learned but—thanks to the headlines—in a highly organized fashion.

Notice how different this is from stream-of-consciousness writing, where the thoughts come crowding in, willy-nilly? If writing is to be clear, the writer must usually engage in some kind of abstracting-&-organizing process at some point<sup>4</sup>; it is the key to logical flow of information. What we want to recommend is that children become accustomed to organizing their thoughts *before* they write. In academic settings, the traditional tool for teaching this skill has been the Roman numeral outline—I, II, III, A., B., C., i., ii., iii.—a device guaranteed to inspire mental paralysis in 90% of small children (not to mention adults). And yet the underlying task can really be as simple as having a discussion around the question, *What are the various topics we’re going to talk about?*

Training.

Food.

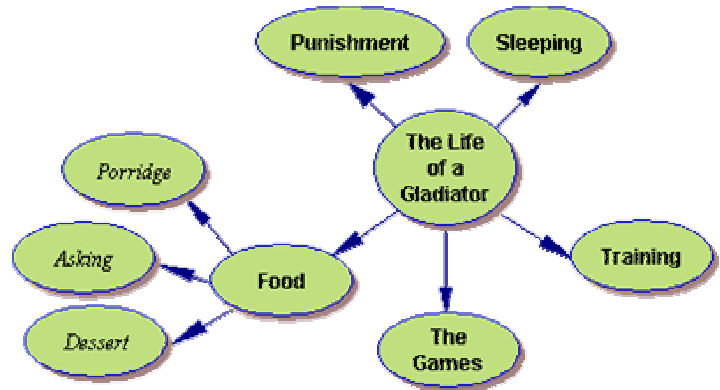
Sleeping.

Punishment.

The Games.

<sup>4</sup> One exception might be certain kinds of narrative—stories in which the writer simply moves in chronological order through the events. In such cases, simple chronology becomes the organizing principle.

An alternative to the traditional outline is the one shown at right—basically a matter of sketching bubbles on a plain sheet of paper: minor topics are shown as satellites of major topics. Such outlines can accommodate a wealth of information; you simply draw additional bubbles as satellites of each topic, as we have done with “Food” (see topics at lower left of the outline). Our son had three points under that topic—*Porridge*; *Asking*; and *Dessert*—his shorthand for the following:



At meals you would eat strong porridge. It would give you muscles if you ate a lot. But if you asked for anything else, you wouldn't get to eat at the table. You wouldn't get any food. After porridge, you would eat ashes for dessert. That would make you strong, but be careful; don't choke.

So how do children develop the ability to abstract and organize thoughts? Most children need a little coaxing. We suggest the following exercises as simple introductions to this skill:

- **Alternate Titles.** You can use this exercise when your children are quite young, and even before they begin handwriting lessons: Simply brainstorm with your child alternative titles to books, chapters, history lessons, etc. This activity encourages the child to let her mind roam over the information at hand and teaches the ability to articulate the main idea behind the story.
- **Circle Key Words.** Look at a paragraph of writing with your child, and have the child circle or copy key words from the paragraph. This exercise assists the child in identifying the salient points—a key skill in comprehending and retaining information and in writing longer, more complicated reports.

**In praise of imitation.** In a number of places we have shamelessly encouraged imitation of one kind or another and even copying. At this point we'd like to emerge from the closet and say that we think imitation is great—a very useful pedagogical device with a long and honorable pedigree. Many of our best minds learned to write by first imitating great authors. Among the best known examples: Benjamin Franklin and Jack London, both of whom taught themselves to write by studying examples of writing they admired and then trying to reproduce them.

The method they used is simple: First, choose a passage of writing you admire, and then, in each sentence, circle what seem to you the key words. Then jot down those key words on a separate piece of paper. Next, close the book or hide the passage from view, and—to the best of your ability and based on the key words alone—try to re-create all the points in the original passage, using your own words. Finally, compare your version with the original.<sup>5</sup>

Granted, this method requires diligence and determination, but without a doubt it builds an understanding of the craft and a healthy respect for a good effect in English prose. Imitation, it must be said, is the precursor to originality—a developmental phase that we all need to pass through and about which one should feel no shame.

**Reports (Expository Writing).** Reports are a great way to put into practice writing skills. One homeschooling family we know—two children, ages nine and 11—have their kids writing three

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Franklin reports: *I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious.*

reports each week: one on any fiction read that week, one on any biography read that week, and the last on any other reading done that week. It is no accident that they sometimes refer to these reports as “narrations”—i.e., they are simply a more mature version of an activity begun as early as five years of age.

Such reports need not be long. Simply have your child make notes on the main points she wants to highlight, then state those points in her own words.

**Writer’s Notebook.** Another idea we recommend is giving your child a notebook so that he can jot down things he comes across in his reading—turns of phrase or ideas that he likes—or events that seem noteworthy. In *A Writer’s Notebook*, author Ralph Fletcher describes how keeping a notebook encourages the child to observe the world around her, document her observations, and use them as a foundation for future written works. The idea here is to preclude the blank-page syndrome many writers can face (the problem of *Content*) and also to foster in the child a notion of herself as *writer*.

### Phase 3: GRAMMAR

*Grammar* is the last of the three capacities that contribute to writing ability, and just to be clear, by *Grammar* we actually mean a number of discrete topics:

- basic sentence mechanics
- the parts of speech
- the key usage guidelines (subject-verb agreement, possession, etc.)
- punctuation
- word usage (*lie* vs. *lay*, *imply* vs. *infer*, etc.)

We have placed *Grammar* here at the end for two reasons: First, an understanding of grammar will not help a child compose a sentence—that ability requires a combination of *Content* and *Expression*. Second, we don’t see the utility of teaching the rules, distinctions, and terminology of grammar to a child who can’t compose a sentence. Without *Content* and *Expression*, in other words, *Grammar* seems like a dubious pursuit.

**Guidelines for teaching grammar.** We have not yet come across the ideal grammar curriculum, though we keep searching. We have a number of specific suggestions, however, for what works and what doesn’t work.

- **Don’t teach it too early.** Many aspects of grammar and usage are subtle and intellectually demanding—they require an unusual blend of two prickly proficiencies: 1) logical application of principle; 2) intuitive grasp of context and intended meaning. Even worse, sometimes you also need 3) an understanding of exceptions to the general principle.
- **Keep the terminology simple**—i.e., as close to plain English as possible. A common emphasis in children’s grammars is terminology like *interrogative* and *declarative*. What’s wrong with *question* and *statement*?
- **Get the priorities right.** One of the challenges inherent in the subject of English grammar is the problem of appropriate emphasis. There are concepts in English grammar that only academics need to know—concepts that you and I would seldom have any use for.<sup>6</sup> Then there are concepts that you will need virtually every time you write; one such concept is

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<sup>6</sup> An example would be *transitive* versus *intransitive* verbs. You may, in fact, dimly recall being taught that distinction at some point in school. The reason you have no idea what it means now is that you have never—not even once in many decades—*ever* had to apply that distinction.

identifying the subject and verb in a sentence. Yet some programs seem to give all grammar concepts relatively equal weight and emphasis—every concept gets the same presentation, same number of pages, same number of review exercises.

Our recommendation: when browsing through grammar material, if you see an essential *sameness* in the way the various subjects are treated and weighted, you should be concerned; the authors may be sleepwalking through the material, giving no thought to the practical importance or utility of each concept.

- **Teach it in the right sequence.** Getting the sequence right is almost half of the challenge: teach things in the wrong sequence and you end up with a hopelessly confused child—in which case you should simply abandon the subject for a while. (Time heals all wounds.) Problem is, we seldom see programs that teach the subject in the most logical sequence.<sup>7</sup>
- **Your child needs exercises in large quantities.** One of the peculiarities of grammar is that your child probably doesn't understand the rule the first time you show it to her, and trying to explain it—that's what you do when she doesn't understand it, right?—often just makes matters worse.

As it happens, children can easily *memorize* the rules—just play those tapes of grammar songs over and over—but they *internalize* those rules only by applying them. And to apply them, your child will need exercises—lots and lots of them. We have seen grammar books that teach a rule or principle and then give eight to ten exercises—when our sense of the matter is that thirty or forty would have been about right, with another twenty for tomorrow's review. The key thing to remember is that your child will not internalize anything after an explanation, nor after only eight exercises. If you're reviewing a program that is anything less than *generous* with exercises, move on.

**Final points.** We'd like to make these final points about the subject of English grammar generally—points you should keep in mind as you tackle the challenge of selecting a curriculum and teaching this subject to your child:

- **The rules of grammar did not come down the mountain with Moses.** Put another way, grammatical correctness has nothing in common with moral virtue or even common decency, and no grammar dispute is worth getting in a fist-fight over. The fact is, the rules of grammar are in many ways akin to rules of etiquette—they're simply conventions of writing or speech, and all man-made.
- **Some grammar rules are bogus.** A number of rules are basically 18th-century inventions with extremely dubious pedigrees and justification. Examples: *Don't end a sentence with a preposition*—the rationale for which derives from the fact that you can't do it in Latin. *Don't split an infinitive*—again, because you can't do it in Latin. *Don't use double negatives*—a rule that has some people doubting the correctness of sentences like *I'm not saying you shouldn't go...* (There's nothing wrong with such sentences.)
- **Some grammar rules are hotly disputed.** When we write, *She has a collection of works by William Shakespeare, Mark Twain, and Danielle Steele*, do we need that comma before the *and*? —Among academics, writers, and editors there are, as it happens, three discrete schools of thought on this issue, and there is no U.S. Department of Grammar to hand down a ruling and settle the matter. Such issues, accordingly, get escalated to a realm known as “style,” and for writers in English there are literally thousands of competing style guides.
- **Your use of language conveys an impression.** The importance of grammar these days is to a great extent social: generally speaking, good grammar suggests that you're educated,

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<sup>7</sup> One program seems very clever in this regard: *Easy Grammar* (on the web at EasyGrammar.com).

civilized, capable; poor grammar simply casts doubt on those things.

What's more, the upside is not as pronounced as the downside. Few people will congratulate you for making your subjects and verbs agree—or even notice that you've taken the trouble to get them right. They will, however, notice your grammar gaffes, typos, and misspellings and may, as a result, doubt your intelligence.

- ***An understanding of sentence mechanics does lead to a few writing/editing tools.*** If you can perceive the basic structure of a sentence—how many clauses it contains, the subject and verb in the main clause, etc.—that perception alone makes it easier to edit the sentence for clarity. It just won't enable you to write the sentence in the first place.

To sum up, grammar is at bottom a *refinement* of writing skill. It should no more be confused with writing itself than setting the table should be confused with the ability to cook.

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In conclusion, we want to emphasize what we feel is, in the last analysis, the importance of teaching our children to write.

There is a profound relationship between clear writing and clear thinking: you simply can't produce clear writing unless your thoughts are clear. Clear writing, in turn, makes it difficult to pass off as truth thoughts that are in fact foolish or dishonest. Good writing, in other words, is a tool our children can make excellent use of in the forging of their own minds and souls—an endeavor in which we homeschoolers will do everything in our power to be of assistance.