

Teach Your Child to Write

The ability to write well does not develop merely from “interaction with the written word.”

By Natalie Kramer

Last year, a fifth-grade student at my son’s school wrote the following sentence.

She told us taught singing and the only person in the world who couldn’t dance, cause she was really bad at it

This child is a native speaker of English, with good reading comprehension and no known learning disabilities. He has been enrolled in a French school from the age of five and writes well in French. What is going on?

The answer is that the French teachers at the school give the children direct instruction in spelling, punctuation, grammar and composition, while the English teachers deliberately avoid such practices. Instead, they wait for the children to acquire writing proficiency when they are ready through “interaction with the written word.”

Even though some children become fluent readers in child-centred classrooms, that is no guarantee that they will automatically become fluent writers as well. The elements of composition are much more complex and harder to develop than the skill of decoding words.

If you have a child who is spending most of his time making cardboard shields and going on trips to the nature centre, you might be wise to take a close look at his written work.

Unfortunately, the jury is permanently out on the question of exactly when children should be expected to have a particular level of skill in writing. Having seen many poor writers quickly come around when instructed via direct techniques, I strongly believe that by grade 4 most children can be successfully taught to write one- or two-page essays that are well organized, correctly written, and effectively deliver the intended message. There is no reason to put off the expectation of correct spelling and sentence structure

until middle school. So what can you, the concerned parent, do?

First of all, you should realize that your top priority must be to help your struggling child. It is highly unlikely that you will be able to effect the necessary changes in the school program in time for your child to benefit. If you find out that your child is not learning the basics of writing or if your child is showing signs of distress when completing written assignments, it’s time to roll up your sleeves. The reason that children find writing assignments distressing are similar to those at the root of problems with reading programs not based on phonics — the children are expected to perform tasks for which they lack the skills.

Of course, few children are enthusiastic about having their parents turn teacher, but it can be done with persistence and rewards for good work. It is best to set aside time and work in a quiet place with no distractions.

It rarely happened this way in our house, however. I work full-time and often don’t get home until eight o’clock at night. I plan my lessons during my lunch break at work and on weekends. I often deliver the lessons while cooking dinner. If I can do it under these circumstances, then so can you!

Almost all grade one students can be taught to spell most of the words they use in their daily lives. They can also learn to write simple sentences using the appropriate capitalization and end marks. The trick is to teach a few of the conventions of writing and allow the children to practise until they can effortlessly produce simple sentences.

Written language is significantly different from spoken language. One of the greatest hurdles to good writing is the children’s natural tendency to simply transcribe fragments of the spoken language they hear around them. As child-centred teaching typically does little to help children learn correct

sentence structure, poor syntactic habits tend to persist indefinitely. A child might say to a friend: “Went to the pool — hot.” Lacking is the notion that a written sentence has to have a certain structure built on a subject and a predicate.

You don’t have to teach terminology, but you can explain to your little writer that each sentence should have at least one “person” or “thing,” as well as tell what that person or thing does or is. You can show your child a simple sentence in a book and ask him to identify the subject and the predicate (or whatever terms you use for them). You can then supply a few subjects and predicates and ask your child to match them and write a short sentence.

You can even add some variety by asking the child to think of a few nouns of his own, since children like to work with words they come up with themselves. Thus, if your child suggests “Fluffy,” “Rover,” and “my favourite book” for complete subjects, and you come up with “chewed the bone,” “scratched the neighbour,” and “got lost” for complete predicates, you can ask your child to write “Fluffy scratched the neighbour.” The rules of capitalization and periods should be explained when the first written sentences are produced.

The *Writing Skills* series by Instructional Fair has many useful exercises on basic sentence structure. The workbooks start with combining subjects and predicates and then go on to sentence expansion. For example, there are several exercises in which the children add the “where,” “when,” and “how” details (modifiers) to a bare bones sentence. This exercise can be done repeatedly by making copies and adding different details every time.

Spelling should be addressed along with sentence structure, and the two can be practised together. I started working with my son on spelling when he was in grade 2. At that time, I ordered a textbook from a neighbouring school jurisdiction which was among the first to return to systematic teaching of spelling.

The lessons in the book followed a phonetic pattern. Each lesson focused on a given sound or letter combination: for example, the most commonly used words with ‘all,’ such as “fall” and “wall.” The review lesson at the end of each unit combined the new pattern with the ones learned in preceding lessons.

My son thrived on the regularity imposed by this structure and started to spell many of the commonly-used words correctly. There are many good texts for teaching spelling, among them those of The Riggs Institute (www.riggsinst.org) and the Association for Direct Instruction (available from SRA at McGraw Hill Ryerson) (www.sra-4kids.com).

Once a child is able to construct simple sentences with simple modifiers, you can introduce modifying phrases, such as appositives, participle phrases, and prepositional phrases. This step is important, because mastering the use and placement of more sophisticated modifiers allows children to advance to writing in a more mature fashion. Instead of adding information by starting a new bite-sized sentence, your child can begin combining details through various syntactic structures.

Mr. Lindsay gave us lots of extra homework. Mr. Lindsay is our English teacher. He was furious about our prank.

might become

Furious about our prank, Mr. Lindsay, our English teacher, gave us lots of extra homework.
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As you work your way through compound and complex sentences, your child’s ability to express his ideas in effective and interesting ways will develop further. I have used several good workbooks, such as Writing Skills for grades 5 and 6 and Learning English for grades 7 and 8, in which the concepts of modifying clauses and phrases were explained.

Recommended Workbooks*

Workbook	Publisher	Web Site
Learning English	Hayes School Publishing	www.hayespub.com
Wordly Wise 3000	Educators Publishing Service	www.epsbooks.com
Writing 1&2	Educators Publishing Service	www.epsbooks.com
Writing Skills	Instructional Fair	www.ifair.com

* all priced at less than \$10

What I found lacking in these workbooks, however, was exercises that would allow the children to actively practise sentence-combining using particular structures one at a time. To solve this problem, I created exercises for my son myself. I would provide short sentences and ask him to combine them using clauses and phrases where necessary to create a well-constructed sentence. My favourite example is the sentence my son wrote in grade 4 about one of our cats: “Eyes flashing, Smokey, a notorious thief, beggar, and glutton, kept vigil by dad’s seafood casserole, waiting for us to turn our heads away from the table.”

In addition to sentence structure and spelling, attention should be given to vocabulary. If vocabulary and word use are not taught deliberately, children often end up with very limited vocabulary reserves. In my son’s school, such children are said to speak “shopping mall English.”

I found *Wordly Wise 3000* by Educators Publishing Services particularly excellent for teaching vocabulary. The exercises in these workbooks are interesting and challenging, yet not excessively difficult. New words are first

defined in isolation and then used in a text. The children have to match phrases closest in meaning and answer questions using vocabulary words. I often combined my son’s work on vocabulary with work on syntax by asking him to build sentences using the grammatical structures we were working on along with vocabulary words from *Wordly Wise*.

Paragraph organization is also easy to teach if you have good materials. *Writing 1* by Diana Hanbury King is helpful for introducing the concepts of topic and supporting sentences, as well as beginning to write short paragraphs. *Writing 2* reviews the concepts and gives students the opportunity to write expanded and longer paragraphs. Instructional Fair workbooks also have exercises for teaching basic paragraph organization. Although these workbooks are intended for specific grades, I found that my son was able to use some of them several years before the suggested grade.

In addition, I had my son write dictations and do précis writing, activities long forgotten by child-centred educators. For dictations, I chose short passages of prose written by experienced or well-known writers. I believe that these exercises helped my son internalize the traditional stylistic and syntactic structures that he was later able to build on in his own writing. It also helped his grammar and spelling.

For précis writing, I chose passages that were not too long but also not so short that he could memorize them and write them from memory. The idea is to have the child listen carefully to a piece read to him and then write it in his own words.

Once given the opportunity to break each task into manageable pieces, to practise and to build the necessary skills, my son began enjoying his writing assignments. His work was published several times in the primary school newspaper.

When I first met his middle school English teacher this year, the first question he asked was: “How did your son manage to learn to write?”

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