

@Brave Writer

The Writer's Jungle

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO WRITING FOR KIDS



BY JULIE BOGART

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Introduction

There is no royal path to good writing; and such paths as exist do not lead through neat critical gardens, various as they are, but through the jungles of self, the world, and of craft.

—Jessamyn West

I never set out to write a writing curriculum. This whole shebang started when a friend conned me into teaching a Sunday school class for homeschooling moms desperate for help in writing. I hesitated. Just because I worked in the field of writing and editing (wrote articles, worked as an editor, helped struggling Doctorate of Ministry students with their dissertations and had ghost written a few books) didn't mean I knew the first thing about the educational philosophy of teaching kids to write.

My kids were writing, but I had never used anyone's writing manuals. I just taught them the way I'd learned to do my jobs. For one of them, my style of teaching worked great. For the older one, I found myself inventing new ideas on the fly—regularly—to keep his pen wet and his pages full of words. He thought writing itself a cranky and irritating process.

So I showed up for that first class of fifteen and within an hour discovered something that rocked me back on my heels. The principles I taught were brand new to the moms in the room. I wasn't repeating information from their various and sundry manuals. None of them had heard many of the ideas I suggested. In fact, it's become common since that day for mothers to tell me that what I teach has transformed how *they* themselves write.

I can't do it. I can't; I can't; I can't. It's too hard. I need to send him to school. Why am I even attempting this?

—Karla

Man-o-living, how many times, or how many different ways can we approach this material for him to get it? I want to move onto the meat and we're stuck on the mechanics.

—Martina

I have a fear of the written word. Once thoughts are down on paper, they take on a life so that I can then be held to what I say or compared with what I've said. Since I do not feel freedom myself, I, ironically, digress to legalism in my teaching approach. Randy, 13, has been slimed the most by my methods.

—Terry

In my best attempts to teach my children everything they need to become proficient writers and successful communicators I'm afraid I have squelched their desire to even put pen to paper.

—Lisa

In college, my experience of writing was the experience of being knocked down, but then stubbornly picking myself up, dusting myself off, and finally succeeding. On my third essay for freshman English, my teacher wrote, "Mr. Elbow, you continue your far from head-long rise upward"—and the grade was D. The teachers I met in 1953 at Williams College were sophisticated and I was naïve. . . . Since that time in my life, I've reflected on a curious fact: If you can't write, you can't be a student. But the inability to write doesn't get in the way of teaching at all.

—Peter Elbow
Everyone Can Write

Whenever I start a class, I like to find out what the trouble is. Mothers eagerly tell me their writing woes. I include some of their comments here. See if any of these moms speaks for you.

"The hardest thing about teaching my kids to write is that they hate it. I know they don't have to like all aspects of school, but they hate this one like nothing else. It's hard to teach because they dread it so. I don't feel confident about it either so I also dread it somewhat. I never know what to have them write, what their level should be, how to grade it... so many variables."

"One of the greatest struggles I've encountered in teaching writing to Kristen is her lack of cooperation. She responds negatively to any writing assignment I give her. I have tried several curriculums, Easywriting, Writing Strands, Wordsmith, EZ-Writer. No matter what I tried, she was disinterested and all I could get out of her would be short, brief sentences and paragraphs. Outside of a school assignment, she would spend hours writing plays and stories on the computer using Storybook Weaver and American Girl Premiere."

"My greatest struggle in teaching writing is the discipline of actually doing it. I lack confidence and motivation to plow through yet another book on teaching or inspiring the child to write readable, enjoyable, grammatically correct, informative, intelligent writing material. I know it can be done, but how to do it? I'm a little embarrassed at how slow we are in our writing skills."

I could go on for pages with comments similar to these by real mothers. What is it about writing that is so challenging? Why can't kids learn to write the way they learned to speak... naturally, over time, with little obvious effort and lots of satisfying success at the end of it? I had to figure out why these writing programs weren't working.

So I read some of those other courses homeschooling moms use. Immediately, I saw the big divide between what I've learned from professional writers and what the educational world teaches about writing. Educators approach writing as a school subject. They dissect writing products and then work backward to create exercises that are supposed to help kids reproduce that kind of writing. Ironically, this approach to writing virtually snuffs out the creative impulse and the personal expression so critical to quality writing. Many a student has been awarded an "A" for bad writing (that is stiff, lifeless, contrived writing) simply by fulfilling the right requirements for the exercise.

Then it hit me: I don't take piano from a piano maker. Why would I learn writing from an educator? When I want to learn more about writing, I don't turn to educators. I consult books written by professionals who get paid for their writing. They focus on a different list of essentials: a writer's voice, the power of personal experience, telling the true truth, becoming an observant person, playing with language, finding a unique angle for the topic... Professional writers want the product not to merely

match a list of expectations but to be a compelling read. .

Don't get me wrong. Educators aren't bad people or even wrong about all they teach. There are many teachers who've caught on to the essence of writing as practiced by authors. And I've learned about writing from some of those wonderful teachers. However, something was missing in most of those educator-generated manuals I read: the connection between the original, spontaneous, genuine, inspired thinking of unique human beings (our kids) and the "how to's" of writing. When teachers focus on writing forms, writing is stripped of its guts and organic power. The results? Blank paper, or stiff, lifeless words that fit into writing-form straight jackets. Blech.

Writing is an art that draws on the powers of thinking, imagination, craft and passion. Think about getting all of those competing forces in your mind to work together and you have a recipe for both inadequacy and paralysis, or wonder and inspiration.

The challenge is to teach this complex tangle of creativity and craft to your kids with the "blank stare" syndrome... but, I'm getting ahead of myself.

The best-kept secret in homeschooling families is how little writing instruction ever happens. You wouldn't know it by the numbers of writing manuals and courses on their already sagging bookshelves. You wouldn't know it by the number of websites and workshops devoted to writing instruction.

When I meet mothers in my classes, they sidle up to me in trench coats and big hairy mustaches. They whisper behind their cocked fedoras, "Psst. Don't tell anyone. I don't teach writing. I've given up." No matter how many books you have about writing there's a chapter missing in every one of them: How to get a kid to move his pencil across a page. Everything rests on this foundation and no one addresses it.

Six well-known writing principles

Have you ever encountered any of these in your writing manuals?

1. In order to write well, kids need to master the mechanics first.
2. Writers write every day.
3. Creative writing assignments that have imaginative topics elicit the best writing.
4. Writing is taught by starting with the word, then moving on to the sentence, then the paragraph, and then the report followed by the essay, and so on.
5. Know your audience before you start.
6. Kids who dislike writing need to write more in order to become comfortable with it.

Teaching my children to write...well, I own *Writing Strands*, *Understanding Writing*, *Comprehensive Composition*, *If You're Trying to Teach Your Kids to Write*, *You Gotta Have this Book*, *Any Child Can Write*, *Wordsmith*, *Wordsmith Apprentice*, and *Institute for Excellence in Writing*. I have read a myriad of 'how-to' books. But my children have written little over the years... Writing brings with it a gnawing, heavy feeling like paying bills when there isn't enough money in the checking account.

—Cindy

Teaching writing is like trying to fish without a fishing pole.

—Lisa

Writing is easy. All you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.

—Gene Fowler

Be warned, my children, against anything more than these. People never stop writing books. Too much studying will wear out your body.

Ecclesiastes 12:12

The Pros who've helped me

On Writing Well, Writing to Learn

—William Zinsser

Bird by Bird

—Anne Lamott

Writing Down the Bones

—Natalie Goldberg

Writing with Power, Everyone Can Write, Writing Without Teachers

—Peter Elbow

The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing

Essays by Amy Tan, Eudora Welty, Annie Dillard, Dorothy Sayers

Home Education

—Charlotte Mason

The Right to Write

—Jill Cameron

The Elements of Style

—Strunk and White

You Can Teach Your Child Successfully

—Ruth Beechik

These sound like good principles. So why don't they work? Why do kids hate writing and mothers hate teaching it? Why is writing curriculum the most popular topic at homeschooling conventions? Because the educational approach to writing is built on myths. All six of the principles I shared above are just that: myths.

Instead of looking to teachers, let's ask the pros for help. They offer it in ways school can't.

At my house...

I have five kids. Three of them are old enough to write. But I'd be less than honest if I led you to believe that we haven't struggled, too. One of my home-educated angels came up with these really new complaints about writing: "Why do I have to write about that?" "Can't I just write three lines?" "I can't think of anything to say, Mom. I mean it." And my favorite "My hand is cramping up. My stomach kills. And I have a huge headache. Can't you just write it for me?"

My daughter, who loves to write, made me cringe when I actually tried to decode her spelling and punctuation. Between the two of them, they used insipid words like "nice" and "good" when describing President Lincoln; they wrote run-on sentences and made 'd's that looked like 'b's. They drew tiny pictures of skateboards, suns and doodles along the edges of empty sheets of paper and worst of all, one of them threatened to throw up if made to write even one more sentence.

I had to find out what was corking their otherwise prolific commentary on life and the things they learn. Certainly my kids have no trouble communicating what they care about while I'm talking to a friend on the phone. Hel-loooo! Suddenly the floodgates of self-expression are completely unleashed. Words and sentences galore.

Simply put, however, they wouldn't allow their energetic minds to be controlled by a hand, a pen and a piece of paper. (And a mother!)

So what's a mom to do? In my case, I examined my writing process. I pulled out my books that teach writers how to write. And I got on with teaching my kids to write the way I wanted to learn. We still have our days when they don't respond to my assignments with sunny dispositions, but when I take the time to teach them to write the way I want to learn, we have satisfying writing experiences that leave me fulfilled as a mom, home educator and writer. I want that for you too. And I want it for our kids.

It's a jungle in there

This course is for you, the homeschooling mother. Instead of sending you down the Congo River alone to figure out how to hack your way through the writer's jungle, let me be your guide. My hope is that in these pages you'll find some new routes to the land of Alive Writing. We'll go together. Sometimes the trails are clearly marked and you'll

make lots of progress with your kids. Other times, a machete is about all that will get you through the tangled spots. But instead of telling you to “go to the other side,” this course is about walking there with you hand-in-hand.

The Writer's Jungle will teach you something about the nature of the writer's jungle—where the swamps are, how to perform rescue operations for kids who are knee deep in the quick sand of resistance, what the academic writing trails look like and how to travel through them. It will offer you an “X” marks-the-spot kind of reference so you'll know when you've arrived at the desired destination: a kid who writes freely and well for his age.

Jungles are unfriendly places. But they're also beautiful, and wild, and exhilarating. Maps are of little value to the gringo who visits them. Visitors need guides, not maps. Guides know how to get along *in* the jungle not just how to get through it.

Your writer's jungle is also a wild place. But I promise you: it's alive and beautiful, too. It's the landscape of your child's mind and heart. Our job is to stop and notice the sights along the way; to uncover the tiny iris lost under the pile of bad punctuation.

It's my hope that you'll come to love your young writer and his particular jungle in a whole new way. By traveling together, I want to point out the irises you've been missing. There's a world of insight, creativity and passion in your children that writing is meant to capture. By taking some new trails, I hope to lead you to that secret place.

Pull on your boots. Let's go. I've got a compass in hand. And you don't have to travel alone.

You'll be happy to know that my daughter wrote a beautiful piece today about when our puppy died. It was so touching I cried as I read it.

Thanks to you I'm able to see her writing in a whole new light—the light of a 10-year-old's world. Thanks again!

—*Kerri*

Hannah, 13
An Orange

Sight -

round
 marigold orange, all over
 peel dimpled like a golf ball
 dent where it was picked from
 the tree
 thick peel
 opaque peel

Smell-

The peel doesn't smell until you
 break into it, it has a fresh,
 clean smell.

The inside smells like a bitter
 and tart citrus fruit, it smells a
 lot like the peel.

Taste -

The peel tasted like toothpaste
 The inside tasted sour and bit-
 ter
 When I swallowed, the bitter
 and sour taste was gone

Touch-

soft
 little dents
 feels like a tongue
inside the skin-
 scaley, like fish skin
 rubbery
 smooth

Most of us haven't been trained in the art of deep investigation. We're products of a school system that expected orderly writing over deep writing. My questions here are an attempt to support you as you retrain yourself to think more patiently and thoroughly about anything you study with your kids. (Read the following to your children.)

Sight

List all of the colors you see. Go slowly. Don't label the color before really looking. You'll see that this object is not just "brown" but may be mahogany and gold from one angle and the color of dull metal from another angle. Get out your 64 color box of Crayolas if you need help coming up with names for shades of color. Compare your item to the colors of the crayons. Identify which part of the object is which color.

- Do the colors influence each other?
- Do the colors separate when viewed up close but blend together from a distance?
- Does the lighting affect the color?
- What happens if you look at the object out of doors?
- Are there colors within the colors?
- Do you see hints of yellow next to the surface reds?
- Are there streaks or lines or smudges in the patches of color?
- Look at the contours or edges of the object. Is the edge of the marshmallow in the hot chocolate a different color than the edge that is in the air?

Look at different components of the object. Get right next to what you're looking at. Pick it up if you need to. Examine it like a scientist.

- Are the parts large or small?
- How do they fit together?
- What holds them together?
- Are the edges jagged or smooth?
- What shapes are created by the edges?
- What shape is the object when viewed from above? From below? At eye level? From each side?
- Can the pieces be taken apart?
- Can you cut it open with a knife?
- Can you tear it apart?
- Does it screw or unscrew? Can it be folded?
- What marks or scars are on your object that come from wear or use?
- What shapes do they remind you of?
- What can be done to your object that I haven't mentioned?

- What would you like to do to it?

Touch

Now that your object is in your hand, describe the textures. Finger all the parts. Go beyond the words smooth and rough.

- What does the texture remind you of? Sandpaper, glass, glue, metal, feathers, cotton balls?
- If the texture reminds you of something you currently own, go get that thing and feel it. Then compare and see if you were right. In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different?
- Can you think of other related experiences you've had?

Touch every part slowly and talk the entire time comparing and contrasting one part to another. Take the object and rub it against your forearm. Does this experience change the feelings you have about the texture? What does it feel like? How about rubbing it against your cheek? Against your neck?

Smell

Set the object down. Close your eyes and smell it. Go slowly. Breathe in several times. Now imagine you are in this room for the first time and you smell that scent.

- What feelings does it conjure?
- Do you feel comforted or troubled?
- Does the scent provoke a memory? Write it all down.
- Does your nose sting or tickle?
- Is it a scent, fragrance or an odor?

If there is no scent or fragrance, move on.

Sound

Listen to your object. If it doesn't make any noise by its nature (perfume bottles don't sing), clank it against something.

- What happens to a piece of fruit when it's dropped on a table?
- What sound do you hear if you crush a piece of origami paper?
- Play the musical instrument. Listen to it. Describe the sounds by comparing them to another experience. Close your eyes and think for a few moments. Imagine hearing that music. Then think of a time that you heard it before and the way it felt in your body to hear those sounds. Is today different? Why?
- Does it have resonance (that buzzing that you feel inside with a bass guitar, for instance)?

Try playing it correctly and incorrectly for different effects. For hot chocolate, you might listen to yourself when you slurp it, sip it, gulp it, drink it.

The following is the descriptive paragraph that resulted from Hannah's *Keen Observation* exercise on the opposite page.

"I like seedless oranges. When I look at this orange I see a round marigold-colored fruit, about the size of a tennis ball. The dimpled peel looks like the surface of a golf ball. The orange has a brown dent were it was picked from the tree. The peel is thick and opaque, and doesn't have a smell until you puncture the peel.

"When I peel the orange, a citrusy, fresh, clean smell sprays me. When I separate the fruit, acid from the orange stings if you have a cut finger or a hangnail. The underside of the peel is white, unlike the orange outside. The inside of the orange smells a lot like the peel. The taste of the fruit is unpalatable like Crest tartar control toothpaste. It made me wince, but the taste did not linger long."

—Hannah (13)

My comments to Claire are in bold. Read them for an idea of how to interact with the results of a *Keen Observation* exercise that you intend to take through the writing process to completion.

Claire, 13

Sound-

When you unwrap it, it sounds like your handling a chip bag.

That's a good comparison. You can add words like "crinkle or crunch."

When you bite into the sucker it crunches and crackles.

And what happens to your teeth? They get full of hard sticky candy that won't come out without a brushing.

I can make the gum in the center pop.

Do you mean that one bite gets you to the center of the pop? To say that you "make the gum in the center" made it sound like you actually produced the gum—as in making it from a recipe and putting it in the center.

Sight-

A violet red oval the size of a silver dollar on a five inch long, 1 cm wide, white stick.

Nice use of violet.

Sort of looks like Saturn because it has a ring around the oval.

I love this! One rule of thumb to consider—delete words like "kind of," "sort of," and "seems to." Simply be bold, "Looks like Saturn because of the ring around the oval."

Taste (*For items that aren't edible, you can skip this part.*)

Lastly, taste your object. Lick it first. Then let the food rest on the tip of your tongue. Then swallow. Now put a bite of it on the sides of your tongue. Then swallow. Compare the flavors. Taste the outer skin of the fruit. Then taste the seeds. Eat a big all-encompassing bite. Then eat small bites of each different part—the skin, the pulp, the seeds. Describe the differences.

- Can you think of other flavors that are similar?
- Is one part of the fruit bitter and one sweet?
- For the hot chocolate, taste the marshmallows that are soaked with chocolate then taste one that isn't. Compare. Use lots of words to describe the differences.
- Don't forget to note how the food feels in your mouth—smushy or crunchy, chewy or dry.

Sip the hot chocolate and describe the feelings as it slides down your throat.

- Does the flavor linger in your mouth or disappear quickly?
- Is one sip enough or do you now crave more?
- Is the drink entirely sweet or also a little bit bitter?

Once these experiences are recorded as notes or on a tape recorder, type them up. They don't need to be in any shape or form—just a random listing of all the images, descriptive terms and ideas that were stimulated by observation. Some kids like to have their lists organized by sense. Some kids don't. There's no right way to do this.

Read the list together (mom and child). Your children may want to do this right away. Others prefer a break and benefit from waiting a day. Show your child all the encouraging words he or she produced. Notice the amount of creativity your kids have in them already. Be aware of the level of intimacy created through thorough investigation. If you are disappointed in the results (think they are obvious and shallow), don't let on. Find one good descriptive term. Notice and applaud it.

Then do the exercise again (another week or day) and build on this first experience. No need to move on until this exercise is one that your child enjoys and develops. On the other hand, if your child is done—doesn't want to do it again, move on. Don't force what isn't there. There will be many more opportunities for your child to develop these skills in other exercises.

Writing comes next, but not yet. So enjoy and savor these results and save them for the next assignment and discussion. If this experience was enjoyable, do it again with another object. Emphasize finding the best and most accurate word for each description. (Synonym finders are allowed!)

A side note. Some mothers have wondered how this process relates to

Chapter 5

Mom's Survival Kit

Rescuing Reluctant Writers
Writer's Block and Bad Assignments

When I was nine months pregnant and living in Morocco, I did a wild and hair-brained thing. I went on a mule pack trip into the Atlas Mountains for four days. We walked on foot up shale and rocks and we rode down on donkeys (I did a lovely dramatization of the virgin entering Bethlehem in my ugly blue maternity dress on the back of an underfed donkey). We slept on the concrete floors of Moroccan mountain dwellings.

The donkeys made it possible for me to go. They packed in all the supplies and carried my extra pair of tennis shoes. I was able to relax and enjoy the exotic experience because I had the details handled. Being pregnant meant that I couldn't carry an additional burden on my own.

At the risk of overdoing this analogy, our kids face writing in much the same condition. They feel like we're sending them up a huge mountain (or into a dense jungle) with no supplies when we assign a writing project. So how can we help?

First we need to ensure that our kids are pregnant with information, impressions, ideas and opinions. They must be saturated with the topic well enough to speak freely about it if asked. But if we're sure they're pregnant with material for writing, we can't expect that they can pack in all their supplies to write about it at the same time.

Before we send them off writing, we must make sure that their mules are packed, that resources are easily within reach to help them out when they get stuck. Supplies for writing include things like a list of verbs that the student makes to help her write a poem. Or it might be a photograph of the painting she means to describe. Some kids like to start writing by making lists of all the items that they'll write about. Others do well to respond to a set of questions (as we demonstrated in the Keen Observation exercise).

Ben acts as though he is allergic to writing at times!

—Jane

C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Branon... pointed out [that] students produce assignments, not in order to be heard, but in order to give teachers something to judge on the basis of their agenda. Since the teacher's agenda is usually the only one that matters, students have to puzzle out what the instructor wants—what in Knoblauch and Branon's term constitutes the 'Ideal Text.'

"To the extent that the teacher's expectations are not satisfied," they explain, "authority over the writing is stolen from the writer by means of comments, oral and written, that represent the teacher's agenda, whatever the writer's intentions may initially have been." That agenda distorts communication, when teachers, who alone know what Ideal Text they have in mind, display little interest in understanding anything that differs from it.

—Silberman
Growing Up Writing

And one of the most obvious and overlooked resources for writing are notes made from conversations about the topic. Whenever your kids say something brilliant about any subject, take notes. Then plunk down that piece of paper in front of your child when he or she writes.

Maps, reference books, charts, notecards and a cleared desk all help writers who are stuck. The point is that most kids have trouble pulling up the facts they need while paying attention to their subjective thoughts about a topic. Throw in the need to write perfectly and you'll have one stuck writer!

As you read ahead, keep these images in mind: pregnant with internalized information or experience and well-supplied with materials that help your child write.

Barefoot and pregnant

Nothing is more deflating than being asked to write about a subject that draws a complete blank. The information may even be inside your child, but the wrong kind of assignment won't draw it out. Here are some examples of writing assignments that miscarry every time.

(Though the contents that follow are the result of real dialogues between mothers and their kids, the names have been changed and some details manipulated to highlight the evil twin in each of us.)

- My dear Theo, write about the field trip you took two months ago. I forgot to assign it then, but you really need it for your portfolio. Come on, Theo, can't you just write a little something? The big boat—Oh, what was it called? You know, that Mayflower look-alike. Listen, I'll call Karen and ask her. Just start writing something and I'll find out the name for you...
- Let's read about Columbus in the history book. *(Two paragraphs later)* Now Deedee, I want you to write a paragraph about Columbus. It doesn't have to be long. *(Pause)* Okay, just three sentences. *(Pausing with impatience)* Here let me write it for you—you dictate to me. What do you mean you can't think of anything to say? *(Look of shock and dismay)* I don't want to reread the book myself, thankyouverymuch. Watch your attitude young lady! I want you to write something!
- Done with breakfast, Fitzwilliam? *(In a cheery voice)* Okay, let's start with your daily journal entry. Write something that has happened today. *(Mother reads what's written; her lips tighten)* I am not interested in what kind of Cheerios you ate for breakfast. Don't goof off! I want this done in fifteen minutes or else... *(Voice rises to a frightening pitch)*
- Kitty, write a paragraph describing a baseball bat. Don't go get it now. Sean will grab it and hit Fiona over the head. I know you don't like baseball, but that's the assignment in the book. Just try to remember what it looks like and how it feels in your hand. What does it smell like? *(Reads first sentence: "I like baseball bats because they are nice.")* That's not what I asked for. *(Voice rattles and eyes narrow menacingly)*

- The writing manual says to write about Christmas. You can write about anything you want as long as it has to do with Christmas, Eduardo. I don't believe that you can't think of anything to write. We love Christmas. Just a few sentences will be enough for me. Let me start it for you. (*Pleading with insincerity*) I'll let you play Nintendo after lunch if you will just write this essay. (*Carrot dangling ineffectively while son forgets everything about Christmas in favor of fantasies about Mario*)
- Here's one of Aesop's fables. All you have to do is to pick three of the adjectives and change them into new ones. Then see if you can write new sentences that improve on Aesop's. I know you are only in fifth grade, Millie, and that Aesop's writing has withstood centuries of scrutiny, but the curriculum wouldn't ask you to do it if you couldn't. Just three little words. Pleeese.

Welcome to the theatre of the absurd as it occurs around kitchen tables across America! We mothers criticize our kids for their whining and complaining. The truth often is (though I hate to admit it) that we whine, cajole, manipulate, threaten, bargain and plead with our kids—all to get a few words down on compressed wood particles. As Charlie Brown says, “Good grief.”

Ground rules for writing assignments

Writing assignments that don't draw on your child's knowledge base are of little value. I've seen workbook pages up the wazoo that make a child redistribute adjectives, work a sentence like some kind of taffy pull and reorganize obvious and pedantic instructions for things like building birdhouses. To develop a good writer—a clear communicator—select quality assignments. Don't be afraid to throw one out, to modify it or to create your own. (Chapter 11—Dumb Assignments)

I'm not saying that all workbooks should be shredded. I'm appealing to your common sense. Can you imagine learning to paint by taking Da Vinci's work and erasing parts of it only to be told to recreate the nose of the Mona Lisa (and do it even better, if you can)? Study the Mona Lisa. Admire it. Analyze it. Attempt to reproduce her on your own canvas. But don't try to make a series of noses isolated from the whole face.

Dictation, copywork and effective reading of good literature should be the sources of exposure to the “masters.” To imitate the writing of an expert is not the same as copying their very words. Imitation is a sophisticated skill for young children. Even high schoolers find it challenging.

Instead emphasize the following: your child's developing voice, his unity of thought and structure, the attention to detail in his experience and how to start and finish with a flourish. To do this, we need lots of assignments that make the most of your child's knowledge base. “Write what you know” is the oldest and wisest advice writing coaches give.

Where does your child begin?

Getting it all down can paralyze your kids as they sit to write. Anne

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

—Kurt Vonnegut

Form is therefore indissoluble. It cannot be cut and studied in pieces. We cannot see and appreciate the form of a face by examining the nose as separated from the eyes or the mouth. If the form is broken down into subdivisions and auxiliary parts for the sake of explanation, this is unfortunately a sign that the true form has not been perceived as such at all.

—Thomas Dubay, S.M.
The Evidential Power of Beauty

I always do the first line well,
but have trouble doing the others.

—Molière

Lamott (author of *Bird by Bird*, a hilarious and helpful book about the writing process) has helped me tremendously in this area. She tricks herself into writing by looking at a one-inch picture frame. She tells herself to write the smallest bit of information that describes an image to fit inside it. We can help our kids narrow the duty of their current project by encouraging them to write about just one small thing. One detail at a time and nothing more at that sitting.

Is it the way the silk worm prepares his cocoon? How about the taste of corn pone that the southern soldiers ate during the Civil War? Don't feel guilty for going slowly. Keep the sessions short and productive. The results may be meager in quantity. Don't despair. Look for true involvement in the writing process first. And that comes with smaller doses of writing at each sitting.

"What if my child is supposed to write a state report? Do I really have to have them write one tiny bit of information at a time? Won't that take forever?"

Yes. It'll take forever. I'm not going to lie to you. Get used to it. One small step at a time that encourages thorough investigation and attention to detail is far superior to a bland, typical, schoolish report of regurgitated encyclopedia information.

The Telephoto lens

Sometimes your kids will have too much information to choose from.

After determining the subject matter for the writing assignment, ask your kids to close their eyes. Give them a few minutes to really see what they're looking at. Ask them what they see. Once they see it, suggest they zoom in like the telephoto lens on a camera. Ask them what they see now.

You can say, "Get that lens focused and squint with your inner eye to see what is there." As they indicate that they have made this adjustment, ask them to describe in words what they see. You can ask all kinds of questions like the ones I mentioned for describing the concrete object. Then write down what they say.

When the writer closes his eyes and zooms in on a picture forming in his mind's eye, he eliminates thoughts and distractions. He gives himself to the task of seeing and perceiving instead of thinking thoughts and words. From there, it's much easier to find the words to go with the image.

The trick is to lighten the load for your kids. Only require writing for what they can see well. If the process seems torturously slow, resign yourself to it. Speed is only gained as successes are accumulated. Your kids need to feel that the efforts they make produce real results that are not painful to them. As they do, their increased confidence will promote speed. Don't ask your baby to run before she walks, okay?

Allow your writers to write freely (badly) at first. Pack their mules with their own comments and observations about the writing topic. Limit the initial writing session to a bite-sized piece of the whole enchilada. Your kids will be lured into the realm of Alive Writing and will escape the prison of writing perfectionism.

It's not uncommon to take an entire month for one descriptive paragraph when you first start out. Don't work on the project every day. Do something each week. My rule of thumb is one writing project per month that goes through all the steps in the writing process.

Inspector Mom

Most of us feel like we're banging our heads against a wall when we start coaxing our children to write. We bellow, complain, guilt and manipulate our kids. I know I have. But don't do it. Repeat after me: all writing problems are reasonable and can be fixed.

But I know you'll forget this rule. Even after you shout, lose your temper and wander off to the kitchen resigning yourself to a homeschool without a writing course, you can still come back to look for the clues to what the problem is. In fact, the best information you can share with your kids is that their difficulties with writing are reasonable, understandable, and possible to overcome.

Writing is about telling the truth and the truth starts off the page. When we assume a posture while writing (writing for an audience that intimidates us, or imitating a style or are feeling too tired from a late night movie but are pretending not to notice), we inhibit our most creative, truth-telling selves. When this occurs, there are two possible results: the resistant writer won't write (child stakes his flag at the Author's Alamo and has sworn to die there) or the compliant student will produce a stiff, predictable and uninteresting work.

Either way is a loss for the budding author. The first student confirms to himself that he isn't capable of writing. The second believes that writing is boring and to be endured. She misses out on the learning opportunity that her writing is meant to produce.

And here's the biggest catch of all. There is no trick or reliable solution to the problem of writing from scratch. There are methods, exercises, and the experiences of others to guide us. However, the real key to breaking out of the trap is telling the truth. Pause, tell your child to close his eyes and then allow him to reflect internally on what is in the way. As he feels your care and attention, many times you'll be handed the key that will unlock his door.

A Learning experience

I've given you some "tricks" anyway, to help the average kid beat the writer's block rap. For most kids, most of the time, these ideas work. But they are not the same as the discovery that comes from the individual

We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer.

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison

We need love and creative imagination to do constructive work.

—Paula Ollendorf

When I face the desolate impossibility of writing five hundred pages a sick sense of failure falls on me and I know I can never do it. This happens every time. Then gradually I write one page and then another. One day's work is all I can permit myself to contemplate and I eliminate the possibility of ever finishing.

—John Steinbeck

child about how he or she best breaks free from those traps that block writing. In my home, I came to this realization while working on this chapter.

One morning I gave my twelve-year-old son a letter-writing assignment based on a novel we were reading. He responded enthusiastically and launched into his first draft (a freewriting exercise). He was barreling along until ten minutes into it—he froze. I coaxed him, asked helpful questions, gently suggested a few things, prodded him a bit more insistently (read: threatened to take away his computer games, unicycle and future down payment on his first house unless he got writing), clenched my teeth and finally yelled at the poor kid, “What is your problem? You know this stuff. Why are you freezing up now?”

We ended in quite a conflict. And all I could think was “I thought I had already solved these problems. I’m writing a book about how to solve these problems. What’s wrong with *him*?” (Notice my ego! Ouch!)

I called my husband and vented my frustration all over him. I had to confess that I was allowing Noah’s difficulties to say something about my adequacy as a teacher.

I paced a bit in the other room, took a few deep breaths and started over.

I’d left out the key ingredient to the exercise: Noah! And as “Inspector Mom” it was my duty to look for the clues to see what had gone wrong for him.

He had started well, but couldn’t finish. I asked him about it. Once he realized that I wasn’t going to attack him with both fists and several of my teeth, he could think clearly enough to tell me some things.

“I have all these pictures in my head—no words. And I want to tell the story but I keep forgetting what exactly came next. And I don’t think I could ever finish it today if I did.”

Wow. A very useful mouthful. When he finally let me read his writing, I saw for myself that he was trying to recount the story in the order of events down to the smallest detail. That was not what I had asked for, but it was what he’d interpreted the assignment to be. Suddenly the task was too large and difficult and paralyzing.

When we identified the “demon” that had descended upon him, we could “cast it out.” I told him about the one-inch picture frame and the telephoto lens. I said this, “Close your eyes. Now tell me what you see.” He described the sailing ship from the book.

“Now zoom in a little closer. What do you see now?”

“The mast and forecastle with a man in it,” he said. He kept zooming in and talking; I kept writing. After a little while, I read back what I had written for him and asked him to take over.

He was more willing by then and my notetaking now got in the way. When I told him his time was up, he said, “Let me just finish this one

sentence and then I can read it to you.” Bingo!

By breaking the writing into small parts, Noah could gather the mental and emotional steam needed to finish the project. We stopped after fifteen more minutes so he wouldn't hit that wall again.

Where there's a will, there's no way

Unfortunately, not all writing problems turn out to be writing problems. Some of our kids are simply throwing hissy fits and need to be told so. By junior high, these fits are especially ugly. Their hormonal bodies give them power. We mothers are first hurt and then angry.

Ruth Beechik reminded me that a lot of writing that started out fresh and unspoiled in elementary school becomes anemic in junior high. Our kids have been in school for years now and are less enamored with the daily grind, I mean, routine. They are savvy enough to think of short-cuts to finishing their school work and balk at being made to put out extra exertion.

Writing requires effort and reflection. Some of our boys, especially, don't want to engage in that kind of work. They look for quick fixes and entertainment.

In addition, many of us have been home teaching for years. We are tired and the pressure to do a good job is mounting. When we hit the junior high years, we hear a siren go off that says, “From now on it all counts.” Then we panic and try to push a little harder with more discipline and regimen.

The combination can be explosive and very detrimental to a healthy writing environment.

Identify whether the problems you're having with your child are unique to writing assignments. If your son or daughter is fighting you at every turn from kitchen clean-up duties to feeding the dog, then writing becomes one more front for battle.

A block in writing is much more obvious than the willful disobedience of a bored or resistant student. Here's how you can tell: try one of the techniques in this chapter to loosen up your child. If these efforts on your part don't result in a freed-up writer, you can then assume you have a discipline problem.

The following list is a quick review of the ideas in this chapter as well as a few others. You can mark the next page and come back to it for an easy reminder when you and your kids hit that writing block wall.

- **Ask, “What's going on inside?”**

Ask your son or daughter what is frozen inside them? What are their literal feelings when they get stuck writing? Do they get nervous, fidgety, distracted? Are they thinking about an afterschool soccer game? Does the topic seem huge and overwhelming? Is he trying to recount all the details in chronological order and can't remember the order? Is she having trouble getting started, but can think of the

The most important lesson I have learned is that writing is completed in stages. As I continue to remind myself to stay focused on which aspect of writing I am teaching (creativity, exploration, description, editing, etc.), I am a more effective guide. My child will be encouraged through the process rather than pushed; the end product will come with a lot of patience and hard work, and I will refuse the temptation of expecting perfection at the front end.

—Terry

Simone wrote yesterday morning, this morning and again this evening. Yes, she was sick of it, but I was getting tired of her procrastination. The best work came after I interviewed her, wrote her responses and actually typed it while she was at karate practice tonight.

I wrote her exact first words to show her how freewriting should be. I wanted her to know that her work, ideas and thoughts were valued so I left the dishes in the sink, walked past the overfilled garbage, forgot about packing for our trip and rushed to the computer to type. When she saw her work, there was a definite change of heart. She was more interested in finishing the paper than eating ramen noodles (this is a good sign!).

I've noticed that Simone tends to think about her feelings, takes a moment to summarize her thoughts and, then speaks—instead of letting her exact feelings/words flow onto the paper. The question and answer session really helped to bring emotions into her paper. I believe a tape recorder would be very helpful for us next time so that she can hear herself and connect with her initial responses/feelings.

—Cozetta

middle and end?

- **Look through a telephoto lens.**

Tell your child to close his/her eyes. Ask, "What do you see? Is there a picture forming or a word or phrase?" If the picture or word is vague, help them to clarify it by saying, "Can you pretend you are looking through a telephoto lens? Zoom in a little closer and start talking now. What do you see?" Then transcribe it while your child has his/her eyes closed. Keep zooming in until there is something to describe. It's easy to get frustrated when the child says he or she can't see anything. Be patient and keep asking gently.

- **Talk about it first.**

Ask your students to narrate orally in any order what they'll write about. They can talk with you or with Dad on the phone. They can talk back and forth with a sibling who is going to write about the same topic. Talk, talk, talk. Tell them to chat with their AOL Instant Messenger buddies. If they can't talk, then it may be too soon to write. Do more research, read another book, watch another movie... then write.

- **Watch out for pencil fatigue.**

Did your child already do dictation, italic handwriting and copywork this morning? If so, perhaps she is just sick of the physical act of writing.

- **Shorten the writing session.**

Reduce the amount needed for today. Narrow the focus and write about one aspect well. Stop after ten minutes. Make lists of words instead of complete sentences. Doodle pictures or graphs.

- **Is this a dumb assignment?**

Does my kid need to write about this? Sometimes mothers assign a topic so uninspiring or irrelevant that her children lose heart. Then the next assignment is even harder to get started. These are assignments like letters they never send, imaginary stories about aliens, what they would buy with a million dollars and so on. Be sure there is a degree of inspiration when assigning something that requires imagination. (See Chapter 11).

- **Use real scratch paper.**

Sometimes our kids are trying to outsmart us. They think if they can just write one perfect draft, they won't have to do the revisions. But then they face that wall again of writing perfectionism, which can be paralyzing. One way to help is to use true scratch paper. Pick up an old flyer, flip it over and hand it to your child. Don't use lined paper. Wrinkle the page so that it's obvious that it can't be the final draft.

Make it abundantly clear that this draft won't be the final product no matter how well they write this version. The psychological help that a lousy piece of paper is has repeatedly amazed me. Kids relax... and then write.

- **Send your child on a walk.**

Sometimes moving straight from a math page or science experiment into writing can create a feeling of loss. The left brain has been on task and suddenly that right brain is expected to wake up and work. Create a gap between subjects so your student has time to process

what it is he/she is going to write about. Pick the topic or read the assignment and then send him /her for a walk to ruminate before writing. After ten minutes, bring your child back to the table to begin the draft or to polish the final product—whatever stage the writing is in at that point.

Of course, there are lots of good books about how to deal with the will and I won't waste any more time here trying to help you. If your child's will is in the way, then all the writing tricks in the world won't help you. Lay writing aside while you get a handle on the more important part of your child's education: his character.

Gabrielle did not want to pursue the topic of Queen Elizabeth I. She seemed to have lots of ideas of stories she wanted to write (and uninterested in doing the brainstorming exercise), so I let her sit at the computer and just start writing down what she had in her mind

Afterwards, we spent time narrowing the topic. Since she wanted to write about a girl going on the Mayflower, we discussed what aspect of that adventure she'd want to focus on. As a result, she chose to focus on the challenges of the journey there. She wanted her main character to be a girl of courage who overcame these challenges.

Then we did some research on the journey. She read four short stories about the voyage of the Mayflower—and in particular, the conditions for children. Afterwards, she brainstormed a list of conditions that her main character would have to overcome. Then for the past two days or so she has taken a few of those conditions and did freewriting on them.

—*Kim*

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