

TEACHING KIDS TO WRITE WELL:
Six Secrets Every Grown-Up Should Know

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INTRODUCTION:

WHY WRITING MATTERS

This book is specifically about writing, but it is also generally about learning. It is about how to stop the negative attitudes about writing that is passed from one generation to another – negativity that stunts the imagination and shackles the human spirit. It is about how to let learning become an end unto itself, rather than a grade on a report card, and how to foster within your child a love of the written word as a means of expressing his deepest and fondest desires.

Writing is more than letters of the alphabet or words on a page. It is the second most important means by which humankind communicates with itself, the first being speech. Unfortunately, the English language, both verbal and written, is in decline. With the advent of email and text messaging, the growth of the non-English speaking population, and increased numbers of students who drop out of school, America is experiencing a dumbing down of language. SAT scores for the 2006 graduating high school class show

the largest year-to-year decline since 1975.¹ These disappointing results are causing many experts in the educational field to sound the alarm.

In generations past, an individual who could not communicate effectively with others was considered ignorant, uneducated, and unintelligent. Today, poor language skills are trendy and are representative of the American teen culture. However, while it may be popular today for young people to hardly finish a sentence or to write using nothing but acronyms, there will come a day in the not too distant future when their lack of eloquence will become an obstacle in their lives.

The National Writing Project states in their report, *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, “In today’s business world, writing is a ‘threshold skill’ for both employment and promotion. In a 2004 survey of 120 major American corporations, respondents emphasized that people who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion.”²

Those who speak and write well stand out in a crowd. They are confident in themselves, obtain higher levels of education, earn more money in the workforce, and often become the leaders in our society. According to the College Board’s National Commission on Writing, two-thirds of salaried workers in large U.S. companies require writing, and over three billion dollars are spent annually in trying to improve employees’ poor writing skills.

¹ The Education Wonks, “Declining SAT Scores: What Happened?” Wednesday, August 30, 2006; educationwonk.blogspot.com

² *Because Writing Matters*, p. 17

Good writing skills are also critical to academic success. A large number of exams given in colleges and universities require essays. But despite the importance of good writing skills in higher education and in the workplace, these skills are in decline.

This is actually good news for your children. In other words, if you are reading this book, you are probably concerned about your child's writing skills and are searching for a way to improve them. By setting your child on the path to more effective written communication, he will one day find himself in that ever shrinking pool of qualified college and/or job applicants who rise, like cream, to the top. Even if your child chooses to remain outside the mainstream workforce by being an entrepreneur or a stay-at-home parent, his/her excellent writing skills will always play a valuable role in their lives.

Research cited in *Because Writing Matters* shows that writing helps develop thinking and problem-solving skills.³ Additionally, utilizing writing in all academic subjects aids in the retention of knowledge and improves reading skills. According to the National Writing Project, "if students are to learn, they must write."⁴

The six secrets discussed in this book are not really secrets at all. Rather they are suggestions on how to create a positive writing environment in your home. Good writing demands an open mind and a positive attitude. Without them writing becomes a chore, or worse, an assignment. While there is nothing wrong with writing assignments, there is something fundamentally distasteful about turning a child off to writing.

At the end of this book you will find a guide to the various stages of learning to write, as well as a description of several teaching strategies to make your child's writing education a success. My intention is to help you, the parent and/or teacher, to help your

³ *ibid.* p. 22

⁴ *ibid.* p. 104

child discover the joy of writing. Once the door to good writing is flung open, all the barriers and blockades that trip up the rest of us will vanish for your child. He will become an “I can” person, and the wonderful side effect is that, as his parent and/or teacher, you will, too.

SECRET #1:

LET YOUR CHILD SEE *YOU* WRITE

*“I talk and talk and talk, and I haven’t taught people in fifty years
what my father taught by example in one week.” – Mario Cuomo*

Let’s be honest. Some of you, after reading the title of this chapter, want to put this book down and walk away. You may be thinking – *Me? Write?* But bear with me here. If you read nothing else in this book, read this chapter.

One afternoon following one of my writing classes, I chatted with some of my students’ mothers. I asked them why they enrolled their children in my class. All of these women were intelligent, mature, and confident, but they had one other thing in common: each had had a negative experience when they were children or teens that convinced them they could not write well.

One by one these women shared their stories. A teacher had criticized one in front of her class. Another had a teacher that covered her work in red marks. Still another was given writing assignments that she found boring.

Since then I have discovered that many of us have had similar experiences. As a result of these experiences, many parents do not feel qualified to teach their children how

to write beyond the ABC's and simple sentences. Yet if I were to ask these same parents if they were qualified to teach their child to walk, to talk, ride a bicycle, or even to read, they would answer with a resounding *Yes! Of course!*

Learning to write may not be as simple a task as learning walk or talk, but the process of learning is much the same. There are three basic stages of learning: *Discovery*, *Desire* and *Discipline*. In order for adults to be effective teachers of writing, they must understand their role in helping their children develop through each of these stages.

Discovery

Do you remember the first time you wanted to walk? You were most likely between the ages of eight and fourteen months when you first pulled yourself up to a standing position and grinned proudly at your parents as if to say, "See, Mom? See what I just did?"

As your legs grew stronger and your balance increased, you took those first hesitant steps "cruising" along from couch to coffee table to chair to couch again. Finally, with your parents coaxing you with open arms, you gleefully pitter-pattered across the floor into their embraces.

What was it that first moved you, an infant, to make that first attempt to stand on your own? Some would say it was instinct, like little birds fluttering their wings to take flight, and for the most part they are correct. I contend that there was something more.

Human nature is driven toward progress. Even the little baby somehow knows he is meant to do more than eat, cry and sleep for the rest of his life. Like walking, communication is something to which human beings are naturally drawn. Children learn to walk and to talk by *observing* other humans walk and talk. Mobility, language and

many other basic skills are developed, not by active teaching, but through passive observation. At first the child mimics what he sees or what he hears without fully understanding if or why these actions have any meaning. Later, he begins to imitate those around him, those whom he respects and, hopefully, loves. He wants to be like them, so he does what they do.

A good example of this is when a young child picks up a book and “reads” it. Maybe she holds the book upside down. Maybe the story she recites bears no resemblance to what is actually printed inside, but that doesn’t matter to her. What matters is that Mommy reads and she wants to read, too.

My third child came to me when he was four years old with a stack of papers in his hand. I had given him an old manuscript of mine to use for scratch paper. He took the manuscript and set up his dresser like a desk, with a penholder, a chair, and a supply of writing utensils. He spent hours sitting at his desk scribbling on sheet after sheet of paper. When he was finished, he presented me with his collection of scribbles and announced it was his book. Needless to say, I was honored. Imitation is my favorite form of flattery.

Maybe instinct drove my son to learn to walk, but would he have known how to sit at a desk and write if he had not seen me do it first?

Children are naturally curious. They want to explore their world and learn all they can about it. As parents we teach them how to color with crayons, how to brush their teeth, how to dress themselves. Children first learn that these behaviors exist by catching others in the act.

When it comes to writing, let your children catch you in the act. Emails, personal letters, grocery lists, calendars, poems, diary entries – whatever drives you to put pen to paper, make sure you do it where your children can observe you. It won't be long before they will be writing, too.

Desire

While children naturally imitate the behaviors and actions of those around them, eventually, as they grow a little older, they start to learn how to do things because they *want* to.

This desire first presents itself during the toddler years when the child's will conflicts with his parents or siblings' wills. An older brother plays with a truck and the three-year-old wants that truck for himself. He grabs it and a tug of war ensues.

At first glance, this situation appears undesirable. Good children, of course, should share. But these children are also learning something very important: they are learning that they have their own unique wants and needs and that they have the power to satisfy them.

This is the very reason why, as frustrating as it is for us adults, we let our children dress themselves, tie their own shoes, make their beds, etc. Most of the time it would simply be easier for us to do these things for them. The dishes would be cleaner, the house would be more organized, and our children would always wear matching socks. However, we would rob our children of the satisfaction of accomplishing something on their own.

Human nature demands that we pursue our own interests. We don't like other people making all our decisions for us. From a very early age, children stake out their own talents and hobbies and interests and dreams.

One little girl wants to be a nurse when she grows up. Another girl loves horses. A young boy is practically obsessed with baseball, while his brother dreams of being an astronaut. No one told these children what they should love or want to be when they grow up. They decided these things on their own.

When it comes to writing, and even reading, one of the biggest mistakes we make with our children is demanding that they read certain books or write on certain subjects with little regard to the child's interests.

Imagine for a moment that you receive notice from the local city council that you have to arrange your front lawn and garden the way they tell you to. They include a list of flowers you are required to plant and a diagram to show you how to arrange them.

How would you feel about that? What would you do? Some people might shrug their shoulders and follow instructions as outlined out of fear, or from a desire to please their superiors.

Other people might feel angry. *How dare anyone tell me how to arrange my own yard?* They might obey the directive, but would do so reluctantly and resent the intrusion. Or they might rebel altogether, preferring to risk getting fined rather than submitting to what they consider to be a form of tyranny.

But the city council has its reasons for requiring everyone to plant the same garden. The city would look prettier, more organized and unified. Perhaps the state government is

offering monetary incentives for implementing a beautification agenda. Rewards are given to those who comply. Punishments are given to those who don't.

What is wrong with this picture?

The creativity and freedom of the individual has been sacrificed for what is perceived to be the public good. Human beings resent being told what to do all the time. Joe wants to plant daisies in his yard. Bonnie likes roses. Mary wants a southwest look with cactus and sandstone. Maybe the city could provide guidelines suggesting certain types of plants that enhance the natural environment, but the final decisions should be left up to each individual property owner.

Shouldn't reading and writing be like this, too? Would you like it if you could only read what someone else told you to read? I could tell you to read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It is a very good book, and you might like it. But if you were forced to read it, how much would you get out of it, really? You might end up resenting the teacher and hating the book.

That's what often happens in school. Students are told what they will read and what they will write. The teachers, of course, have the children's best interest at heart. It is for their own good that they read *Huckleberry Finn* or write an essay on the Revolutionary War. These things are important! They need to be learned!

There are a few students who, like the compliant gardeners, shrug their shoulders and do the assignment. They do what is asked of them so they can earn the reward that is offered: an 'A' on their report card. Maybe, if the teacher is lucky, one or two of these students might actually love the assigned topic. But the vast majority of students are less

than enthused. Some resent it, but do it anyway, just to get a passing grade. Others rebel, preferring a bad grade to wasting their time on a topic that is of no interest to them.

Wouldn't it be nice if every child could love what he/she reads, or feel enthusiastic about researching a topic and writing about it?

This is actually not an unrealistic expectation. The key to helping children enjoy writing is to tap into a child's natural *desire* to pursue his or her own interests.

A child who loves football will *want* to read about it, write a letter to his favorite player, or learn how to play football himself.

A girl who loves poetry will *want* to read poetry, write poetry, and learn what she needs to know to become a successful poet one day.

As a boy, my father loved comic books, but he couldn't read. That didn't stop him, however. Though he liked the pictures, he really wanted to know what the words said. Over time, through his love of comic books, my dad taught himself to read.

As adults, we should pay more attention to our children's interests and then use those interests to motivate our children to learn. Parents know their children better than anyone else and are better able to connect them to the very resources that will motivate learning. The primary objective should be the interest itself, whether it is rocket ships, rabbits, or racquetball. The act of reading and writing should be secondary.

For example, when my daughter was young, she developed an interest in monkeys. We went to the zoo to visit the chimpanzee, orangutan and gorilla exhibits. We read all we could about them while there. Afterwards, we decided to write about what we learned. My daughter was too young to write on her own, but as I asked her questions, she

dictated her answers and I wrote them down. We also added pictures we had taken that day and a postcard of the chimp exhibit.

This experience not only enabled Carissa to learn about something that interested her first hand, but she also learned how to put her knowledge into words and how those words are then written down.

Parents are best equipped to tap into their child's unique interests and talents and to use those interests as a tool for teaching literacy. The child is, of course, learning to read and write, but he is having fun doing it and does not concern himself so much with those things as he does with *what* he is reading and writing *about*.

Discipline

As children grow older they will need to understand that sometimes we must learn for the sake of learning. They may not love math, but they need to learn the times tables anyway. They may not have a natural interest in history, but it is important that they know the difference between the Revolutionary and the Civil Wars.

These are just examples, of course. As adults, we understand that there are some things in this world that are important to know. We also realize that there are some things we must do whether we want to do them or not. The laundry must be washed and folded. The lawn must be maintained. The bills must be paid. A child learns how to commit himself to even seemingly undesirable tasks by watching his parents' examples. If the parents procrastinate, complain, and fail to get the job done, then the child will likely do the same. However, when parents are committed and dependable, their children will learn the value of these qualities and will be more likely to develop them as well.

The difference between adults and children, however, is that adults generally understand *why* a thing must be done. We understand that even though we don't like mowing the lawn, if it doesn't get mowed the grass will grow too long and make the yard look ugly. Unfortunately, adults sometimes forget to explain the *why* to their children. We tend to give a command, such as "Mow the lawn!" And when the child moans and asks, "But why?" we might respond with, "Because I said so!"

While knowing the *why* may not automatically make your children more committed right now, over time it will. Just as understanding the *why* of certain tasks is important, children should understand the *why* of learning to write well. What motivation is there in writing a five paragraph essay if the objective is nothing more than learning how to write a five paragraph essay? However, if the essay becomes a tool for learning something of interest to the student, then the motivation increases.

I taught a class in essay writing not long ago where my objective as the teacher was for my students to be able to create an outline, conduct research, and write a well-organized essay on a particular topic. I recalled having to write essays in high school and how much I dreaded them. So I decided to find some way for these students to learn what was necessary without turning them off to writing all together.

The answer was in allowing each student to choose a topic that was of great interest to him. The topics ranged from hamsters and alligator lizards, to the history of baseball and how to play Yu-Gi-Oh. While I taught the very concrete skills they needed to write their essays, I allowed complete freedom in the subject matter.

On the last day of class each student read his essay aloud. Not one student expressed boredom, frustration, or even apathy in their assignments. Rather, everyone was

enthusiastic and proud of their accomplishments. Their primary objective of learning about something they loved was obtained, and my objective of teaching them how to write an essay was also obtained.

Children need to learn to write well, but unless there is some obvious benefit to them, they will resist learning it. I am not talking about unrelated incentives like candy, or an allowance. I am talking about a desire to develop a skill that will enable them to pursue their interests.

If a child needs to improve his penmanship, have him write something that must be read by someone he cares about. Grandpa has to be able to read his letter, so he needs to write as neatly as possible.

If a teen needs to learn to write a bibliography, let him gather together some of his favorite books and practice on those.

If an older child needs to write a book report, have him choose a friend that he thinks would like to read it, too. Have him find some fun way to tell this friend about the book such as creating a book cover, making a poster, or retelling the story in his own words.

When To Begin Writing Instruction

Experts in the educational field have found that it is best to begin teaching children to write at an early age, and that reading and writing are “best learned together.”⁵

Formal instruction may not commence until a child is six, seven, or even eight years old, but that does not mean a younger child cannot grasp the fundamental concepts of reading and writing.

⁵ Because Writing Matter, p. 60

Learning to read begins the first time a mother opens a picture book and reads it to her baby. Repeated daily interactions between parent, child, and books soon form the foundation that will one day motivate that child to learn to read on his own.

Likewise, when a child is introduced to words printed on a page, he is already gaining the preliminary understanding that letters form words, words form sentences, and these words and sentences express ideas.

During recent decades there has been an increasing push for parents to read to their children. Research has shown that when parents and children read consistently together, literacy improves.

The same holds true with writing.

In their report *Because Writing Matters*, The National Writing Project makes the following observation:

“We cannot build a nation of educated people who can communicate effectively without teachers and administrators who value, understand, and practice writing themselves.”⁶

Might I suggest that we cannot build a nation of educated people without *parents* who value, understand, and practice writing themselves. Teachers and administrators may have the expertise and curricula to educate mass numbers of students in the more technical side of writing, but no teacher is more effective in instilling within a child the love of writing than a parent who loves that child and who teaches by example.

⁶ ibid