

LET'S WRITE

When I talk to teachers of English and homeschooling parents teaching their children to write, it's always mentioned how hard they find it. It's like there's a huge empty space out there called Teaching Writing and there're no clear rules written anywhere to explain how to do what they know has to be done.

After 30 years teaching writing in schools and 10 years working with homeschoolers, I've been exposed to many ideas that I know won't work. There may not be just one way to teach anything, but there are some ideas, that when examined, prove to be just silly. Of course I won't identify specific programs, but you might recognize some procedures.

Acknowledging that teaching writing is very complicated, you'd have to agree that simple solutions to complicated problems usually don't work. This should eliminate in your mind all those programs that tell you that learning to write is easy or that it's simple to teach kids to write. It's not.

There are some procedures that you might ask questions about before you adopt them.

1. You could start with the idea suggesting that kids can teach each other to write. In public school they call it peer reviewing, or group learning or co-learning. Examine the principle carefully before you adopt it for your children. What it says to you is that if you take two or more children who don't know how to write and have them help each other, they'll learn together. The big question is, of course, where does the expertise come from?

The children who are older or more experienced or better at writing might be able to tell the younger, less experienced children some things, but who helps the older ones? What experiences do the older children have at teaching that will assure that the right information gets passed on? Do the more experienced children give to the younger ones their misconceptions and mistakes, thereby compounding the problems? And, why aren't all children entitled to the help of adults? Each child trying to learn to write needs the careful consideration of an adult in the evaluation of the effort.

2. You've heard the proposal that kids should have the fundamentals of language before they begin to write. You may have read that it's like a foundation for a house. "If the foundation isn't sound, the house won't be strong." The problem with this idea is that you're not building a house, you're teaching a child to put his or her thoughts on paper for someone else to read. The analogy to building houses just doesn't work.

There's lots of research on the place of grammar in the training of children to write, and all of it shows that the naming of the parts of speech doesn't help. I like to use an analogy that does work.

Suppose that you were to want to teach your child the complicated skill of riding a bike and you were to use this principle—like it is suggested you do in teaching writing—and you were to decide that your child needed the foundations of bike riding first. You would say to your child, "I'm going to teach you to ride a bike. So, the first thing that you have to learn is the parts of a

bike and where those parts go on a bike. You'll learn about sprockets, spokes, peddles, frames, axles, gears, wheels, rims, brakes, grips, bearings, nuts, washers, and you'll even learn to spell the parts. Then you'll draw a diagram of all those parts of a bike, showing where each part fits. You'll even memorize the definitions of the parts. When you know all that, I'll put you on a bike and you'll be able to ride like the wind."

You recognize that that's just silly. But, the principle used with the bike is the same one used with the study of grammar with young writers. Kids know the grammar rules that govern their language or they couldn't talk and make sense. What they don't know is the names of the parts of speech, and they don't have to know them to write well. They must learn to use standard English, but that is best taught in conjunction with their writing and not in abstracted exercises in grammar workbooks.

So, if you've been told that your young children need a grammar program and you're inclined to buy one, check your library for some of the research on the subject. Try *Endangered Minds* by Jane Healy or *The Language Instinct* by Stephen Pinker. They should convince you that the idea of trying to teach complex, abstract concepts to young children is silly.

3. Someone might try to tell you that there is such a thing as a three sentence paragraph, a three or seven paragraph essay, a seven sentence story or some such nonsense. Before you buy such an idea, think about the concept. How many sentences are there in a story? Are these people talking about a plot line, the structure of a paragraph or a paper outline? Everyone knows that stories don't have seven sentences. They come in all sizes. All storytellers take a different number of words to tell a story. There are no formulas for this. This is an attempt to tell you that a very complicated concept and process can be taught with a simple means. It doesn't work.

Sure, sentences, paragraphs and stories have structure and so do essays, but they don't have a specified number of sentences. That's just not a reasonable way to teach children how to think about communicating ideas.

4. There are people who might want your money for a program that suggests that if kids keep journals they'll learn to write. Journals are useful for two situations: professional writers use them to record scenes, characters, situations, experiences or thoughts that they want to save for future use; and, professionals use journal writing to break out of writing blocks. They force themselves to write every day in a journal until the words flow smoothly again.

Most teachers who teach journal writing do so because it's easy and the kids produce lots of paper, and they think that they're teaching the kids to write. Most proponents of journal writing suggest that the journals not be corrected. "The students should not feel inhibited by the pressures of form." So, what are they learning about writing? They're really just reinforcing their errors week after week. They're learning nothing about techniques of communication. They might as well be copying words out of some novel and calling that writing training. In fact, in many schools, that's what the kids do, they copy page after page and turn them in. Since it isn't graded or corrected, who cares?

In order to learn to communicate, students needs to have goals, an audience, and a person more adept than they are at word use who can look at their efforts and advise ways to improve them. It's easy to tell your child, "Write in your journal," but what does it teach your child?

When you're about to adopt a program for your children to learn anything complicated, you might ask yourself some questions first. The answers to the following questions should eliminate

some of the silly suggestions offered.

1. What goals do I have for my child in teaching this ability or concept? In teaching writing you have to ask yourself what level of use do I want to train my child for. Do I want my child to be prepared for university work if he or she chooses to attend? If this is the case, you can eliminate those programs that teach things like letter writing and story telling. Colleges and universities won't ask for that. They will expect their freshmen to be able to write explanatory and argumentative essays. So this means that you must choose a program that will teach children the skills they will need to be able to learn those types of essay writing when they're in their high school years.

If you're thinking of training your child to use language for occupations like the ministry, law, teaching, politics or business, you'll have to select a program that you're sure will produce word-use precision. Examine any suggested program for its end results. Make sure that you select a program that will carry your child through a complete course of instruction, right up to college entrance. A program advertised as a "Good way to start and then switch to a program that is more sophisticated," may be just wasting your child's time and your money.

2. What method does the offered program use to give my child the skills needed? Does the program talk to me or to the child? In other words, who is being instructed? Are you expected to be a writing teacher and teach your child, or does the material assume that you haven't been trained that way and the material gives the child all the needed information? Most of the textbooks that are used for both public and Christian schools assume that there will be a trained teacher there who will have experience teaching the subject. If you don't have that experience, watch out for those programs. In this case you need a program that contains all the information your child will need to assume the skills taught.

3. What about the process of evaluation? Does the proposed program assume you're so well trained that you don't need help with this or that you're so inept that you're given answer keys for checking your child's writing. You must realize that there are no answer keys that make sense when you're checking for the efficient transmission of ideas in writing. If there are keys for answers, check what your child will be learning and see if it's in a skill that will be called for.

4. Writing is very complicated but is one of the most important skills you can give your child. The ability to give ideas to others with clarity and precision is so important that universities tell us that if a student has this ability, they will be able to teach the rest of what will be needed, but if a student comes to them not able to do this, that student will have trouble in almost all classes. So, when faced with programs that suggest that your child will learn to write by writing reports about other subjects, think about it carefully. Is a knowledge about Egyptian pyramids what your child needs or is the ability to write about them is what's needed? Where is the training in writing coming from as your child is doing this report? What will the child carry away from the experience?

To organize this complicated teaching job is to break it down into parts that make sense. Think about what is involved in communication and how the skills are given to young people. Examine any program carefully before you select it. Do the people offering it want to give your child identified skills in controlled increments culminating in planned abilities that will be required, or is a fun-sounding idea being offered? The decisions you make about your language arts program for your children are too important to be made lightly. You can't rely on advertisements or projects that sound

like fun or ones that sound simple. You can't judge value in training material based on the color of the books or the kind of pictures printed on the pages. You have to pick a goal for the training and examine programs that will give those identified skills to your children with methods that are proven sound and are consistent with the research in the field. Your decision is so important that it's surely worth a little time in a library reading studies on the subject of teaching writing.