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# Excellence in Writing

An effective method for teaching writing skills

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## So... So... Awkward

By Andrew Pudewa

Awkward. Even the spelling of the word is disturbing. If we look back, we likely have memories of high school or college teachers having scribbled the ugly “Awk” word in the margin of our paper, leaving us with the tremendously helpful insight that whatever it was we were trying to communicate didn’t quite work. The common reaction to such feedback is to defensively justify, “if I could have written it better, I would have written it better!” Which, in fact, is probably true. It’s discouraging for anyone to get criticism without coaching. Yet, as parents and teachers we can easily get trapped into repeating this cycle with our students, who can quickly become as frustrated as we were. How do we help students produce less awkward writing? To effectively do so, we must understand three key ideas: teaching methodology, expectations based on student maturity, and the importance of process vs. product based coaching.

### Teaching Method

Initially, we must realize that awkwardness is a normal part of the process of learning any art. Teaching writing is more like teaching music than any other academic subject. In math, for example, answers are right or wrong. (Well, it used to be that way.) In history or science, you either know certain facts and their significance or you don’t. However, in writing, you can do things which aren’t quite “legal” but sound very stylish. You can also write things which are perfectly legal but sound awful. Solid growth requires a constant feedback loop between a student and a teacher, who share in a process of listening, modeling, coaching, trying, listening, modeling, coaching, trying, etc., thereby developing the skills needed for independence and mastery.

Would we expect a music student to play every note perfectly, in tune, with correct rhythm and beautiful tone the first time he or she tried? Not at all. We would expect awkward sounds, wrong rhythms, and out-of-tune notes as a normal part of learning to play a musical instrument. And if we were to stomp all over the student for every mistake or bad sounding attempt, how long would he or she want to play the instrument? Probably less than one lesson. Instead, good teachers follow a three-step procedure:

1. Affirm something about the effort which was well done, even if it's a very small thing. Without a sense of success, few people can continue to struggle with something difficult.
2. Select one skill to focus on—probably the most critical thing, leaving other weaknesses for later work. Break down—or slow down—that skill into small manageable parts, mastering each one through careful, successful practice.
3. When the area of greatest concern is sufficiently improved (which may take weeks!), move on and address the next most important issue in a like manner.

In teaching writing, we can follow a similar three-step procedure:

1. There's always something to affirm in a student's work: a good (or even interesting) word selection, a dress-up that actually did work, a sentence or paragraph that does make sense or follows a particular rule, or even just the fact that the assignment was completed! If a teacher starts out on a positive note, then any constructive criticism that follows will likely be better received.
2. Choose a particularly awkward sentence from the child's composition. Copy it into a notebook for yourself, and then at the start of the next lesson, create a similarly awkward sentence to study together by changing some of the nouns or verbs, etc. Put the sentence on the board and discuss it with your students, helping them to see why it is awkward or incorrect, then rewriting it together. Repeat this process each day or each lesson, using a similar (but different) sentence, until they can consistently correct it by themselves.
3. Select another awkward sentence or usage, and repeat the process of working through similar sentences together, discussing and rewriting one a day, until that idea or skill is better understood.

Children (and adults) are always more willing to correct other people's errors than their own. By providing them with contrived mistakes to correct, we give them the practice they need in small, focused, non-threatening parts. Thus, we can teach at the point of need, without stomping all over a child for every awkward word or construction (which can wipe out the student's motivation).

## **Maturity and Experience**

Maturity is a significant factor in use of language. Even into their teens, children don't necessarily have the sense, habit, or objectivity to read what they wrote, compare it against a more refined standard, and make corrections and improvements. Understandably, youngsters may not have such a standard

established, either because of a lack of reading and listening experience, a lack of attentiveness while reading or listening, or a lack of exposure to the type of writing they are trying to accomplish. Many children spend a lot of their reading time absorbing stories and novels, but are too colloquial when writing reports and essays, which often need more sophisticated language and sentence patterns. Other children don't read much at all and don't have the opportunity to be read to extensively enough. In either case, we have to remember that you can't get something out of a brain that isn't there. We must be constantly aware that quality input is a prerequisite for quality output. (For a detailed discussion of the two best ways to establish reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns in a child's brain, see the article "One Myth and Two Truths" available on the IEW website: [www.excellenceinwriting.com](http://www.excellenceinwriting.com).)

An interesting and encouraging case study in maturity is that of a young man who, at the age of 13 and 14, wrote the most awkward stuff imaginable. Generally, the teacher didn't have a clue as to how to help this student. In fact, the flow of ideas was so fragmented that it was usually necessary to question him verbally just to get an idea of what he was thinking when he tried to put ideas on paper. Even basic usages were difficult and his stories and essays were plagued with both run-on and incomplete sentences. Naturally the boy seemed to dislike writing intensely and complained throughout class. Nevertheless, he, the teacher and his mother kept at it. Now, at the age of 19, this young man is at the top of his University English class. His mother recently wrote: "He is in his second semester, and his English 102 instructor has asked him to submit his most current assignment for publication. She was very impressed with the final product."

This story illustrates not only that a parent's persistence pays off, but also that even students who struggle greatly with writing in their early teens do eventually grow up and gain maturity, which, when combined with consistent, good teaching in the early years, can bear excellent fruit. However, in addition to using the right teaching method and having patience while children mature, we must also have the right attitude in coaching our students.

## **Process vs. Product**

How then do we help a student refine his work to the highest level he is capable of, without helping "too much?" After all, if we do too much of the work for him, he won't learn anything, right? This is typical of a traditional or institutional way of thinking, but it lacks common sense. In reality, you can't actually help a child too much. Why not? Because they will tell you when they don't need help. Children's main goal in life is to become independent at anything and everything. While it is true that there are some children who—because of personality, conditioning, and/or a long period of discouragement—have become what might be called "lazy," most all children intensely want to grow up and "do it myself." If our main role is to instruct and test, instruct and test, we have no time to model, coach and

encourage. If our main goal is to coach and nurture, our students will gain independence naturally and effortlessly. In coaching children, it is critically important to understand that children *like* to do what they *can do*, they *want* to do what they *think they can do*, and they *hate* to do what they *cannot do*. To ensure success, give them tasks that they can do well, and help them believe that they can do more. But don't force it.

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki often compared children with plants. How does one effectively raise a beautiful and healthy plant? Shouting, "Grow! Grow!" at the plant has little effect. Instead we give. We give it sunshine, water, good soil, and careful attention. Children are much the same, but the influence of our competition-and-standardized-test-obsessed educational culture frequently eclipses our common sense. How often do we covertly or overtly communicate to a student, "You can do better than that," which, translated by the child, is: "Do it better than you can do it," and that just isn't possible. Instead, we must water, nurture, and coach: "Great work! May I help you? Here's an idea that might make it even better." The term "correcting" de facto infers error. Don't "correct" a writing paper; "edit" it for the child. Explain to your students that every good writer has an editor. In the professional world, practically no one writes anything all by themselves. Editors are essential. Nobody is perfect. (You may need to know the difference between a mom and an editor; an editor fixes your paper and cheerfully gives it back to you with no lecture attached.)

And why edit the child's paper? For only two reasons. 1) To give him a chance to produce a more refined version of his work, and 2) So that he will learn by your silent modeling on paper, internalizing the changes, trusting your judgment, storing another bit of data about what is reliably correct and more sophisticated English. Never, ever, "correct" a child's paper, stick a grade on it, show it to him and be done with it. It's not likely he's going to pay much attention to your comments and suggestions. Without encouragement and coaching, the marks you've made communicate "bad," "wrong," "stupid." The only reason to mark on a child's paper is so that he can use those edits immediately to produce a more polished product, and in doing so, learn how to write in a more refined way. In teaching writing, we must above all else learn to be good coaches for our students. Oliver DeMille, in his discussion of Thomas Jefferson's education, promotes the concept of mentoring and coaching as the primary job of a teacher or tutor. He points out that the areas where public schools have been most successful have been in athletics, debate, music, and theatre—the activities where you most likely find coaches rather instructors. What do coaches do? Coaches encourage. They know what motivates a person to try harder. Coaches demonstrate by example. They get down and show how it's done. And coaches have patience. They know how to water their plants and wait. We must think of ourselves as writing coaches, not instructors.

## Commitment

With a new school year ahead of us, let's all commit to better teaching, especially of composition. By implementing a correct teaching methodology, by understanding our students' levels of experience and maturity, and especially by emphasizing process over product—coaching and nurturing rather than instructing and testing, we can not only help our students grow out of awkwardness, we can help them gain greater satisfaction from the difficult art we call writing.

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