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Writing without Tears

By Andrew Pudewa

Teaching writing can perhaps be one of the greatest challenges in home schooling. Because of the bleakness of "grammar workbooks" or the lack of structure provided in a "creative writing idea book," many families have inadvertently put English composition on the "back burner," only to find that their child is growing up fast and has had little actual writing experience. Perhaps "reports" have been done—you know, the kind we did in fifth grade—in which the student copies sentences from the encyclopedia, trying to change a word here and there so as to avoid plagiarism, until he has enough to fill the page. Often a child will happily write stories but balk at dealing with facts. Other children intensely dislike writing stories, as they do not know any stories to write. An extremely rare child will keep a journal. Most would rather wash the dishes than write an essay. Unfortunately, many parents feel that in order to teach writing well in a home school situation one must have some type of advanced training in English and education. Not true!

Fortunately, home school parents are strong in what is most important—common sense. Realizing that in order to teach anything effectively it should be broken down into simple and manageable chunks, successful parent-teachers see the wisdom in separating the problems of "thinking of what to write" and "learning how to write." Much the same as we would not expect a child to pick up a violin and make up a beautiful melody without years of technique practice and memorization, it is against common sense to ask a child to sit at a blank piece of paper and expect him to "put down his thoughts" without any practice in the mechanics of writing. For many kids, the task is overwhelming and brings struggle, frustration and tears. This need not be. Using a common sense approach, a wise parent or teacher will allow the child to learn to write using available information which he does not have to remember or imagine.

Let him rewrite a fable or bible story he has read or heard many times. Let him read or hear the story and then tell it back in his own words before writing it. Let him use information from a book or encyclopedia for a report, but instead of allowing him to copy sentences, have him copy three or four "key words" from each sentence and then reconstruct the idea as a complete sentence himself. Sometimes his will be better than the original. Remarkably, this is the very method that Benjamin Franklin used to teach himself to write, as is recorded in his autobiography:

About this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished if possible to imitate it. With that view, I took some of the papers, and making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then without looking at the book, tried to complete the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words, that should come to hand.

We can use this "Ben Franklin" approach for our students and ourselves. As the method is simple, keep the content simple at first. Find an Aesop's Fable or a short chunk of text from a content book. Here is an excerpt from A Beka's *My America*:

"In God We Trust" is written on every United States coin. The word "Liberty" is also on each coin. It tells each person that this is a free country. Our country was founded by men who believed those words. It is because they trusted in God that we have our liberty now.

To make a "key word outline," simply choose the two or three most helpful "key" words from each sentence. Use a title to help. With your child, you might create an outline that looks something like this:

"In God We Trust"
1. written, U.S., coin
2. "Liberty", also
3. tells, free, country
4. country, founded, believe
5. trusted God, liberty

Then have the child verbally tell back each idea using just the key word outline. If the concept is unclear, feel free to reread the original. This is not a test. After the child can verbalize the idea for each set of key words, have him rewrite the information in his own sentences. It might come out something like this:

"In God We Trust" are words written on U.S. coins.
"Liberty" is also printed on each piece of money. Our money tells all the world that we live in a free country. Our country was founded by men that believed in God. Because they trusted God, we have liberty today.

The goal is not to reproduce the original exactly; it is simply to have facts and ideas to use for the purpose of practicing writing sentences. For older children, use a higher level of reading material and make writing a part of the study of all subjects. Not only will this make the activity of writing much less painful, it will strengthen their understanding of the content being read and studied. It is a highly effective and common sense approach to learning something: read it, tell it back, and write it in your own words.

Summary:

By using existing "source texts" to rewrite and practice basic skills, children can increase their confidence and competence, gradually building their writing stamina and fluency. Then, when it comes time to put their own thoughts into written words, the needed skills are there. By separating "what to write" and "how to write," you can teach writing without tears.