Inviting Children to Write

ideas to jumpstart creativity

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Preface:

The title of this book is *Inviting Children To Write* because my emphasis throughout is on the importance of creating an atmosphere of trust and encouragement. Writing is communication. It is important that if we want children to communicate in writing that we create a safe place for them to do so. It is difficult to feel comfortable to express oneself if one is afraid.

Contents:

Be a Scribe

Writing is a way to communicate. Something we sometimes forget when children first start to write. Stories are the essence of communicating. Everyone tells a story. Lawyers must present their client's case in a believable fashion- tell a good story based on facts. How well the lawyer tells the client's story - clearly, succinctly, and sympathetically - is a big part of the outcome of a trial. A customer complaining about a bad product has to tell a story about why this product did not meet expectations. A grandmother wanting to share her perspective on life with a teenage grandchild needs to find a way to tell her story so that it can be heard.

One of the best ways to begin the process of writing with children is to invite them to tell you stories. Children love to tell stories especially if they are encouraged. They want to share their perceptions of the world. Take the time to listen and write down their stories. Very young children's stories may consist of just one word, but that doesn't mean the stories are less valuable than stories with more words.

Repeated experiences of having their stories recorded help children learn that we, the adults in their life, listen and value their words, their thoughts, and their stories. And it gives them the opportunity to experience first hand the power of the written word.

Being a scribe for a young child can help you to preserve their thoughts. It also helps you gain insight into a child and gain a new appreciation for him or her. Being a scribe for a child is a way to build a positive relationship with a child. It gives children a wonderful feeling of importance to have someone recording their words. Be sure to write the date and the name of the author on the story before you start.

What to do as a scribe:

- Write down each word as the child relates the story.
- Do not change or edit the story.
- Do not criticize the action in the story.
- If you are uncertain what the child is saying, ask him to say it again.
- When the child is finished, read the story back to her.

And then story by a three-year-old child.

> And then Miss Witch was going off in the woods and she heard an animal. And then she didn't know what the animal was. And then they found a nice stick to make into a Christmas tree. And then they found a Christmas tree in the woods and then they did chop it down. And then they went home and decorated the Christmas tree. And then they went to bed. And the next day was Christmas. And then they got out and they had some balloons and sleds and some wires. And Santa Claus gave them another ax for Lulu because the other axes were all worn out and some skis and a telephone. And Santa Claus gave them two axes because the others were all worn out. And that was all the presents.

This is a typical *And then* story. Children will tell this kind of story until they are six to ten years old. This sequential narrative is a sign that a child understands that things progress from one thing to another. This understanding is necessary for a child to be able to learn to read. Pre-reading workbooks often include activities of sorting pictures to put in the correct order to tell the story. When your child is telling you an And Then Story she is using her ability to order and make logical sequences. Writing down these stories can provide a fascinating record of your child's progression in logical thinking as well as a record of their imagination.

Here's a suggestion for starting this kind of story with your child:

> This morning, I got up and got out of bed. And then I went to the bathroom. And then I washed my face....

If it is difficult for a child to tell a sequential story, then learning to read might be difficult because a child has not yet developed the sense that one thing happens after another thing. Children develop this ability at different rates.

Sometimes, as children get older, they like to play with sequential order and put in things that don't follow sequentially to add some interest and fun to their story. Children often add things that are totally unexpected and surprising. If you are hoping for some unexpected events to enter into a story you might start a story yourself adding an unexpected event and ask your child to go on from there.

> This morning, I got up and got out of bed. And then I went to the bathroom. And then I washed my face. And then I saw there was a door in the mirror above the sink. And then it started to open.

Story Starts

You can also use the beginning of various stories to stimulate writing. For example:

> Rufus had not learned to write his name in school, though that is one place for learning to write. He had not learned to write his name at home, though that is another place for learning to write. The place where he had learned to write his name was ... (from *Rufus M.* by Eleanor Estes)
>
> The village at the forest edge was quite a ways from the clearing. When the snow came ... (*The Golden Bird* by Edith Brill)
>
> I came in and saw the parcel on the kitchen table. It was addressed to me! I ran over to ...

Picture Story Starts
You can also use a picture as a tool to begin a story. For example, the illustration below could be used to start a story about spring

.

Story Dice

Create a set of story dice on paper by using the pattern on the next page. You'll need to print two pages giving you an extra cube. Cut out each pattern, and label each square in each cube.
Character Cube - king, frog, washing machine, etc.
Setting Cube - backyard, forest, ocean, etc.
Problem Cube - lost the way home, vacuum cleaner sucked up mom's ring, lost, etc.
Fold the pattern on the lines to create a cube, tape sides together and have fun rolling the cubes to get the story basics. I created this method to add to teacher resource guides that I wrote for Story Theatre.

Story Dice

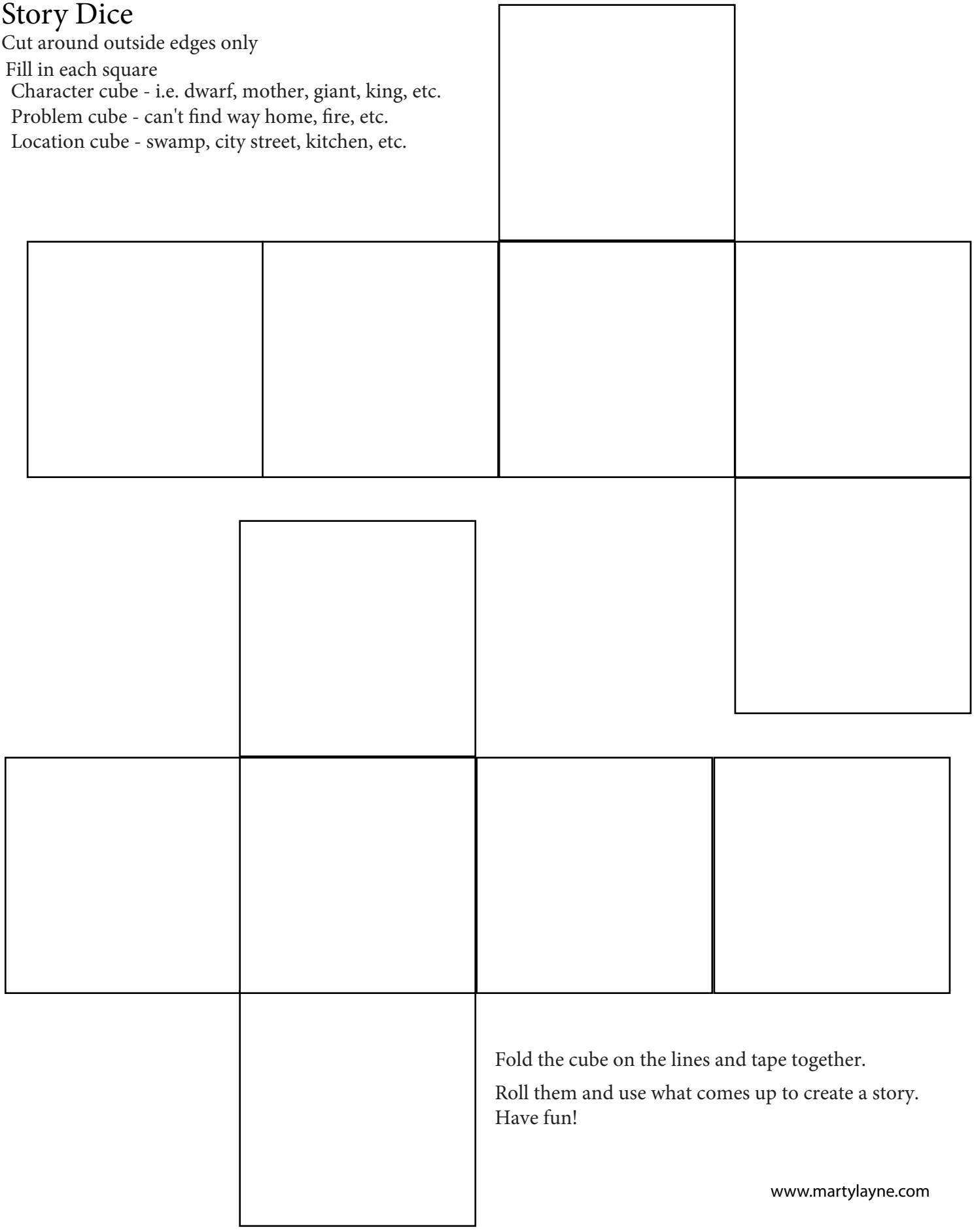
Cut around outside edges only

Fill in each square

Character cube - i.e. dwarf, mother, giant, king, etc.

Problem cube - can't find way home, fire, etc.

Location cube - swamp, city street, kitchen, etc.



Fold the cube on the lines and tape together.

Roll them and use what comes up to create a story.
Have fun!

In chapter 8 of her book *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*, Vivian Gussin Paley describes the power that stories have for children and how she used the children's own stories to encourage dramatic play. Stories are one way that can help children process the events that happen in their lives.

The story and poem that follows were written by my oldest son after a visit from his Oma, the Dutch word for Grandma.

> US Air
> Once upon a time, Oma got on a big airplane in Boston to come and visit. And she slept overnight
> lots of times. And it didn't seem lots of times. And then they missed her when she was in the airplane.
>
> Song:
> URS Air
> Oh we were there
> Oma goes, too
> And I miss her very much.
> Airport, I would like to go
> On US Air
> And go visit Oma.

My son turned four during his Oma's visit. She came to celebrate both his and his brother's birthdays. The words in this song still speak poignantly to me.

Children of four have had so little time to experience things. Their perceptions and expressions of their feelings offer us a fresh look at the world and are often filled with a profound wisdom and simplicity. Writing down their thoughts is a way to preserve their unique take on the world.

Stories are also a way for a child to try out different roles and see what happens. It's very important when a child is telling you an imaginative story that you don't interrupt the flow of words to try to bring reality into the story process. Let the child explore with his or her mind and write down whatever is being said. In other words, encourage children to develop their imagination and don't censor.

I wrote down many of the stories my children told me when they were young. I wish I had written down more. Some of these stories were turned into books. Their father loves books, so some of the stories were made into books to give him as presents. I helped make the books they gave their dad. As everyone got older, they no longer asked me to be their scribe. They both illustrated and wrote the story in the books they made on their own.

These books are treasures. I enjoy looking at them now and reading through them. Some of them were written and typed using invented spelling. Even the author now has a difficult time reading what was written, although I can often puzzle it out. As I read through these books of invented spelling, I remember each child at that age and how differently they each thought and wrote down (encoded) sounds.

Creating Homemade Books:

Sewn Binding

Once all the pages are organized and drawn and the story written, you can sew the edges together on a sewing machine if it is not too thick. Legal size paper folded in half creates an easy to hold size book. The pages can then be sewn down the middle easily by hand or by sewing machine or you can also punch holes and sew the book together with just a few bits of ribbon, yarn, etc. We found that drawing the pictures and writing or typing the words on a separate piece of paper and then gluing it into place made it easier to fix mistakes.

Stapled Binding

Like a sewn binding, you can staple the edges or the middle to create a book. A colored piece of construction paper makes a good cover.

Unique Book Shapes

Create a fun shape – such as a snowman, hat, shoe, sock, etc. to use as a template for a special shape book. Cut out two shapes from sturdy paper such as card stock or construction paper and fill the inside with regular paper. Staple together and you have a unique book that can be used as a journal, for stories, etc.

Small Plastic Photo Album

(holds 4" x 6" photos) 10-15 pages
Find paper the right size or cut card stock to fit the pages of the photo album so that they easily slip in. Children can create their story on each individual page. Two of my children liked to draw the pictures first and then tell me the story. Two liked to tell me the story first and then draw the pictures. The advantage of the small photo album method is that it is easy to fix any mistakes on a particular page. Just replace the page that the child is not happy with by slipping in a new one. Each sleeve easily holds two pieces of paper back to back.

The next page is an example from a story written by an almost eight-year-old using this method. I removed the cards from the photo album and scanned it in to reproduce here with permission. I hope that this example of what the self-generated writing of an eight-year-old can look like is helpful to you. Children progress in their spelling abilities over time and with exposure to the words they read in books and other printed material.

IT WAS HALLOWEEN AND A BOE AND GRAL [redacted] WOT A BLOG

THRAA CAAM TAVA HOM THPAA NOCT ON THE DOR TRICER TREET HiBA YOU DOO

THRA CAAM TO A HOWS THPST RST THPAA WER A BOGT TO NOC ONO THE DOR

ONES THERA HET GIN HOM HGO HPER HOBO

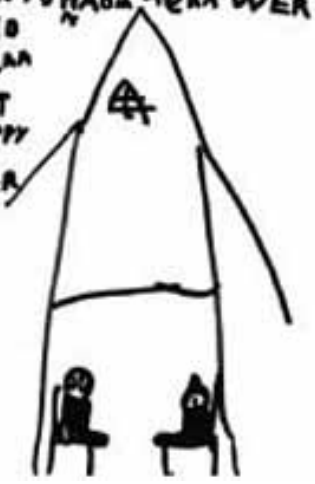
A WICH SWEAOT DOBN AND PIT THEM UP

AND OPP SHPO PLAD TO HER HOM

PADF [redacted] TWO CAT TWO CAT EPPER

THE WICH WAS TYBRT FROM CASTIOSHELS SO SHEE [redacted] DSLVDT TOSLVP WPN SHEE [redacted] WAS A SLVP SEM FRES OPIN THE DOR GRATHE CATS AND RAN OFR

THE FRES HET HER WAT THE WICH HET SBB THERA SED IT BACWERS HOO NEGE HOGO PADE NOW T BACTO HAOM THERA WER AND THERA OL LIFT HAPPY FOR EVER



Nonfiction Writing

Much of adult writing is nonfiction writing:

- Lists
- Appointments
- Reminders
- Dates
- Thank you notes and letters
- Greetings for special occasions

Lists

Some children find it fascinating to help write grocery lists. Very young children will sometimes write a list of items they want to purchase. Their lists are written with a great deal of intent although they may look like scribbles to us. Some children really enjoy making lists of names, toys, birthdays, etc.

Invite your children to participate in making lists for items needed from the grocery store. If a child is uncomfortable with forming words with letters, you could suggest they make a pictorial list – draw a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, or a carton of milk. You can write the word beside the picture. This can help a child begin to connect the two things together. When you get to the grocery store, you can give your child part of the list and encourage him to find the items while you look for other items in the same aisle.

Diary

Keeping a diary is also something that children might enjoy. Give your child a special notebook. I'd suggest starting small – a notebook that's 4" x 6" or 3.5" x 5" is less daunting than a larger notebook. A special pen or pencil can also make writing in a journal attractive. Once I introduced the concept of keeping a journal, I left it in my children's hands to go on from there. Some of them maintained a journal on and off over a few years. Others found they liked to write at first but then they moved on to other interests.

Trip Journal

If you are going on a trip, you might consider getting notebooks for everyone in the family and setting aside a time each day for everyone to write in their journal. Or you could have a family journal where each person can write or contribute thoughts that others write for him or her. This type of journal can then be turned into a memory book with photos of your experiences on the trip.

You can also use large index cards (5" X 7") and ask your children to create postcards by drawing a picture of something they saw or did that day. Use the lined side to write something about the picture. If this sounds interesting, you might enjoy reading the book *Stringbean's Trip to The Shining Sea* by Vera B. and Jennifer Williams to your children to introduce the idea. It's a book based on postcards written by a boy to his parents and grandparents about the trip he is taking with his brother across the country to the Pacific.

Memory Book

If you have a child who is fascinated by scrapbooks or memory books, help him start a memory book of his own. Remember to keep everything simple. It doesn't have to be elaborate, filled with the latest bells and whistles of decorations, stickers, etc. Some children find creating decorative memory book pages fascinating and fun. Remind yourself to offer suggestions and help when asked and not to take over.

Greeting Cards

When you need to send cards for special occasions or other reasons, birthdays, anniversaries, thank you notes, etc., encourage your children to make their own cards. A picture drawn by a child and a few words about the person celebrating the occasion is more meaningful than a card bought at a store. An acrostic poem using the name of the person the card is for is a great way to make the card special. There are examples of acrostic poems further on.

Descriptive writing

One of the things that makes writing interesting is descriptions. Here is an example of some ideas that you might find helpful in stimulating descriptive writing.

*Encourage children to become keen observers
*Go outside and look around
*Ask children to tell you what they see
*Write down some of the words they use

Describe an activity
Sledding
Going fast was exciting.
The sound the sled made on the snow was sort of a whizzing sound.

Make the sentences more active by using active verbs.
We sped down the hill on our magic carpet
The sled sizzled as it went down the hill.

Keep in mind that not all children will be interested in doing this. Some children would rather be left alone to think things through. And sometimes the best time to talk about language, descriptions, or active verbs is not when you are helping a child write but at other times, such as when you're reading outloud.

Another descriptive writing exercise is to ask why a child did or didn't enjoy an activity. Write 3 lines with at least three words on each line.

What did you like about making cookies?
Mixing is fun!
They taste good.
They smell good.

I asked the adults in my *Inviting Children To Write Workshop* to write a description of something that happened before they attended the workshop. I asked them to write at least three sentences with at least three words each. When I asked if anyone was willing to share what they had written, no one volunteered. They felt vulnerable, that their writing wasn't good enough.,etc. They did not want to be judged. I shared what I'd written and we talked about how important it is to give children the choice as to whether or not to share their writing.

When I ran a writing group for seven to twelve-year-old homeschooling children, they were eager to share their writing with each other and with me. I asked them to read their work to us so we could focus on what they had said rather than on whether or not it was spelled correctly.

Writing Poetry

Acrostic Poems

Another writing exercise many children seem to enjoy is writing a descriptive poem using the acrostic method. Choose a word and using each letter of the word as the start of each new line, write something about the activity or word.

Here are some examples. The first two are mine written for demonstration purposes for a writing workshop. The others are samples from my children's writing.

COOKIES
Cookies taste so good to me.
Only they disappear too fast.
Oatmeal cookies are my favorite
Kind.
I love to bake.
Each time it's easier and the cookies taste
So good!

SLEDDING
Sledding and sledding down the hill
Long lines form and I wait my turn
Everyone has mittens on.
Down we go, really fast!
Down to the bottom until we fall off.
Icicles forming on the trees.
Never stopping until we have to go home.
Got a new sled for Christmas.

OWL by 10 year old
Over the
Woods silently
Looking for mice

MOUSE by 10 year old
Mostly scampering
Often found in the woods
Usually up at night
Sometimes stopping, sniffing
Eating flowers and seeds.

<u>**CROW** by 12 year old</u>
Crows calling, flapping around,
Riding on air, hopping on ground.
Only the raven matches his black.
With wings outspread, he flies.

Descriptive Poems

Here is a formula for writing a descriptive poem that children often enjoy. This is about a pet but it could be about an activity, a place, etc.

	<u>Pet Poem by 8 year old</u>
State pet's name	Thumper
Pet's colour	Gray white and black
Describe pet's size	Medium size
Where pet lives	He lives in a cage.
What pet eats	He east bananas, grass and dandelions.
Describe the way pet looks	The way he looks is nice and cute.
Add a wish	I hope I'll have him as long as I live.

Many children find that writing a poem is not as daunting as writing a whole story. They often enjoy writing poems just for that very reason.

More Nonfiction Writing Ideas

Nonfiction writing is a broad field. Some nonfiction writing is done by journalists who try to present information about an event or situation from a neutral point of view, offering information from various sides of an issue. Other nonfiction writing presents a certain point of view such as newspaper editorials, told from a first person point of view, or essays where one can speak one's mind about an issue.

Instruction or identification manuals are examples of nonfiction writing. Research is usually involved when writing nonfiction. Even though the content is nonfiction, it's still important to tell a good story, so story writing helps both fiction and nonfiction writers.

Interviews are another example of nonfiction writing. Children can interview an older family member and then write a story based on that person's life. Here are some ideas to keep in mind when preparing for an interview:

Prepare ahead of time with a list of questions
Be a good listener
Be a good transcriber
Be able to develop the story

Family newsletters can be a way for children to share their writing. Help them put together a newsletter of stories, poems, interviews, opinions, descriptions, etc. and publish it to send to various family members. A newsletter is a great way for children to develop and learn not only writing and keyboarding skills but also design and editing skills.

Mechanical Skills of Writing

Writing also consists of mechanical and physical skills. To create writing readiness, give children lots of opportunities to use pencils, pens, markers, etc. Drawing, painting, doodling, coloring are all great ways to learn how to hold these writing tools. Encourage children to write their names and the names of members of their families. Remember that reversal of letters is common and that there is a wide age range in which children develop their interest and ability to write. For some, writing may never be their preferred method of communication. For most adults, writing is not something that is done frequently except in a work related setting.

Spelling comes over time. "The more a child reads, the better his or her spelling becomes,. quote from *Stephen Krashen*. His main points:

> Memorizing lists of spelling words isn't all that effective.
> Most people learn to spell by reading.
> Writers need to concentrate on writing and not worry about spelling until they are finished and in the revision stage.
> Ideas are more important than correct spelling

It's important to remember that while being a good speller is a good skill to have, it doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be a good writer. Over time, most people's writing skill improves the more they write. And keep in mind that English is a particularly confusing language to spell and pronounce.

Hints for Pronunciation for Foreigners
Attributed to George Bernard Shaw

I take it you already know
Of tough and bough and cough and dough?
Others may stumble but not you,
On hiccough, thorough, lough, through?
Well done! And now you wish, perhaps,
To learn of less familiar traps?
Beware of heard, a dreadful word
That looks like beard and sounds like bird,
And dead: it's said like bed, not bead –
For goodness sakes don't call it "deed"!
Watch out for meat and grate and threat
(They rhyme with suite and straight and debt.)
A moth is not a moth in mother
Nor both in bother, broth in brother,

And here is not a match for there
Not dear and fear for bear and pear,
And then there's dose and rose and lose –
Just look them up – and goose and choose,
And cork and work and card and ward,
And font and front and word and sword,
And do and go and thwart and cart –
Come, come, I've hardly made a start!
A dreadful language? Man alive!
I'd mastered it when I was five!

My children learned the parts of speech through playing games of Mad Lib. These games consist of stories with blanks. Before reading the story, the players complete the list of words asked for, such as a singular noun, a verb, etc. It can be quite a fun and painless way to begin to learn about the parts of speech. Mad Libs come with different themes and can be found in book and toy stores.

Helping child learn to use a keyboard efficiently is more beneficial than worrying about perfecting cursive hand writing. John Holt, in his book *Learning All The Time* published posthumously, suggests that printing is faster than cursive writing. (Cursive writing is based on copperplate writing done by scribes.) We did some time trials to see if his theory holds true. It was true for some members of our family and not for others.

I think it is important to realize that while you can help a child gain mastery of the physical skills of writing, knowing how to physically write doesn't mean that a child will choose to write. Helping a child learn to express himself is the other part of learning to write. Some children may find that words are not the form of choice for their expression. Instrumental music, art, movement, or song may suit them better than words.

My children didn't choose to express themselves in writing very often when they were young. I frequently reminded myself that most adults do not express themselves in writing very often. It's usually done verbally or if written, in journal form that's not for public consumption.

Writing is Thinking then Communicating

Writing is more than putting words on paper. It's a final stage in the complex process that begins with thinking. Some writers write everyday at a certain time no matter whether they have anything to say. Other writers spend a lot of time thinking before they begin to write and only write when they feel ready. There is no right way to write. However, most writers find that they need time and quiet to write. So if you are inviting children to write, give them time, quiet and a space to do their creating.

To create a book or story takes many hours. Some writers know the end of a story before they begin. Some writers start writing and the characters take the story in various directions. Some writers start one way and end up another. And some writers combine any number of methods. Writers often find they need to do some research to make their story more believable or realistic even if it they are creating a fantasy story.

In conclusion

Writing consists of two parts: the mechanical side - letters, spelling, grammar, etc. - and the content. When you are helping children learn to write, remember that it is the content, the message that's important. The mechanical side will come with time as long as a child is supported in her efforts. Give your child room to play around with words, writing styles, invented spelling and wait until asked to correct the mechanical side of the writing. Whenever possible be a scribe so that he or she can see his or her stories written down.

Remember that we want to invite children to share their thoughts. Accept that children make errors in their writing. Focus on what it is that's being expressed rather than the grammar. Ask a child if he or she would like you to do any editing. Treat the writing with respect and respond with genuine appreciation.

Model writing and let children see you writing. Children learn what the people around them do. They want to participate in grown up activities so that they, too, can be grown-up.

Help make the transition from verbal communication to written communication a gentle one, filled with encouragement.

About me:

I helped my children learn at home in the 1980s and 90s. I wrote *Learning At Home: A Mother's Guide To Homeschooling* to answer the many questions people had about how this worked. This booklet is an adapted and extended version of one chapter of that book. For more information and to read excerpts from my book go to **www.martylayne.com**