

Writing To Learn

In This Chapter

- ◆ Defining writing to learn.
- ◆ Types of writing.
- ◆ Correcting written work.

One of the best ways for a student to understand a topic is to write about it. To write successfully, students must comprehend the material, restructure the new information, and then share their new understanding. The concept of writing to learn is more than just an accumulation of reports that the student must write; rather, writing to learn helps students to think carefully and learn completely.

Writing assignments are not only about creating ideas, but learning. All writing is an exercise in thinking, an exercise through which we learn new connections and see new directions to take with our ideas. During writing assignments, students learn how to assess information and determine its appropriateness for inclusion, how to evaluate and compare, analyze and discern, add their own feelings to the

material, organize information, and communicate their conclusions. Through these processes, students learn to manage and use information to solve problems, interrelate knowledge, and effectively communicate.

Excellence will be learned by continually practicing clarity, accuracy, relevance, prioritizing, consistency, depth, and breadth through writing activities. Diligence will be developed by producing the required quality assignments.

Cafi Cohen, author of *What About College*, explains her children's writing experience:

As teenagers, our kids seldom did grammar exercises and never wrote reports and term papers. According to some in the educational establishment, they ought to be poor writers. Not so. Both got A's in their college freshmen English classes. Friends now often ask them for help editing assignments. Both enjoy writing, and they produce credible pieces for college classes as well as for real-life purposes.

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Successful authors, it turns out, never recommend diagramming sentences, memorizing verb tenses, taking spelling tests, and identifying parts of speech in random sentences. And they seldom advise using textbook writing techniques, like identifying predicates and combining sentences by creating subordinate clauses. Instead professional writers discuss developing leads, writing and rewriting, writing for real purposes, avoiding clutter, and choosing words. They talk about their writing toolkits—those practices that help them produce clean, informative, and entertaining poetry and prose.

Most significantly, successful authors describe writing as a process, not a product. Each writer says that his process, developed over a long period of time, is idiosyncratic; that is, his approach, often established through trial and error, is peculiar to him.

In reading about the practices of professional writers, I had to ask myself why I was trying to improve my (adult) writing one way (reading good writing, reading about writing, and writing and editing my work), and my teenagers' writing another way (with grammar exercises and pointless papers). And, of course, I had no good answer. So I made a command decision: no more grammar exercises, punctuation drills, or assignments to write papers on meaningless topics. It was time to catalog and USE with my kids the techniques suggested by successful authors.¹

One of Charlotte Mason’s narration methods for younger children involves “telling back” favorite stories read to them by their parents. As children grow older, they can progress to reading passages on their own and then telling back what they’ve learned in verbal or written form. Talking about what they have learned, whether aloud or on paper, helps students learn to think and remember more effectively.

Many teachers in traditional school environments use writing as a way of testing. They use it to find out what students already know, rather than as a way of encouraging them to learn. But the active processes of seeking information, compiling notes, and evaluating, analyzing, and organizing content, as well as personal reflection, choosing and constructing words, and expressing ideas in writing, are valuable learning tools which students will use for the rest of their lives.

Catherine Copley compares writing to baking bread in *The Writer’s Complex* (another food analogy!):

Writing provides food for thought—it enables you to knead small, half-baked words and sentences into great big loaves of satisfying thought that then lead to more thoughts. Developing ideas involves getting some ideas—in whatever form—onto paper or screen so you can see them, return to them, explore them, question them, share them, clarify them, change them, and grow them. It really is almost like growing plants or kneading bread and waiting for the results: plant the seed, start the process, and then let your mind, including your unconscious, take over. Go to sleep and let your dreaming continue to develop your ideas. Humans were born to think; it’s almost impossible to stop us. Writing helps us to bring all that activity into consciousness, helps to clarify and direct our thinking, and generate more thinking. Writing, thinking, and learning are part of the same process.²

Before you Begin

Before you give any writing assignment, your student should have a clear understanding of the writing process. The writing process and writing to learn is explained in detail in the suggested writing handbooks available from our web site in the Language Arts/Writing category: *Writers Express* (grades 5–6), *Write Source 2000* (grades 6–8), and *Writers Inc* (grades 9–12).

Various Writing Activities

There are countless ways to encourage your children’s writing skills and incorporate writing to learn into your homeschool curriculum. Good writing assignments always start with a clear goal. Ask yourself, “What do I want to my child to learn from this?” By

defining your goal you'll be able to give detailed guidelines about both the writing task and the final written product. Use these principles:

- Keep in mind the specific goals.
- Remind the student of the audience, purpose, writing situation.
- Make all basics of the task clear.
- Break down the task into manageable steps.

The next pages give a few example activities.

Writing Summaries: A Narration Method

Several activities in Heart of Wisdom unit studies recommend that the student read passages from the Bible or other literature and then write a summary. This is an excellent way to tell how well one understands something they have read. This method is almost always required preparation for deeper thinking, and is an important tool for research writing. Adding summary writing to your student's routine will increase his or her ability to understand and remember.

Knowing how to write a summary is an essential skill for studying and writing in college. A student has written a good summary when he or she has portrayed the real meaning of a piece of writing in his or her own words. While writing summaries the student will learn sources and integrate the ideas and information of others into their own thinking. The length of a summary is determined by the student's purpose and audience. Students must first have a basic understanding of the material and then carefully paraphrase the selection. One reading will not, in all likelihood, enable them to write a good summary. Writing a summary is for conveying the meaning of what was read in one's own words (paraphrasing), with the fewest number of words and sentences, and without a biased opinion. Summaries are to be objective, explaining what the author stated, not the student's feelings or personal evaluation of the material. Explain to your students the steps in writing a summary:

1. Read the work.
2. Reread the work several times, using various reading strategies such as previewing, skimming, and scanning.
3. Locate the main idea in each paragraph. Highlight and then write down the main ideas, in order, on a separate piece of paper.
4. Write and rewrite the information, condensing and arranging the summary in the

best fashion.

5. Rewrite and reread; select, eliminate, and add information until satisfied that the summary is complete, clear, concise and correct.

Informal or Free Writing

Informal or free writing is probably the easiest to implement of all writing-to-learn activities. In its basic form, free writing is simply writing down everything that comes to mind, usually for five or ten minutes without stopping. Focused free writing, which uses some kind of prompt (a term, an issue, a question, or a problem) is useful for the thematic units in this curriculum. This type of writing is unconstrained by any need to appear correct in public (similar to brainstorming). It is not yet arranging, asserting, or arguing. It is still reflecting and questioning. This is probative, speculative, generative thinking that is written in class or at home to develop the language of learning, and it may not even be read by a teacher.

Specifically, informal written language will help your student to:

- Develop the ability to define, classify, summarize, question, generate criteria, establish inferences, imagine hypotheses, analyze problems, and identify procedures.
- Improve methods of observing, recording and reporting, organizing and structuring data into generalizations, formulating theories, and recognizing and applying the methods themselves.
- Learn about central concepts such as problem solving, thinking, learning, communicating, and knowledge itself.
- Develop the ability to question, create problems and solutions, wonder, and think for oneself.
- Understand one's own beliefs and attitudes toward learning, knowing oneself, one's work, one's own and others errors, the knowledge and opinions of others, and the attitudes that affect behaviors.

Journals and Blogging

Students can journal in a learning log or other type of journal. A more formidable type of journal is the double-entry or dialogic journal. Students copy down thoughts, quotes, facts, or impressions from the unit study in one column or on one page and write responses, questions, and insights in the next column or on the facing page. In this way

the writer engages in a continuing dialogue with the material. Journaling can be an important part of life in any field or profession.

Blogging (short for web logging) is a type of journaling that is popular on the Internet (weblogs, online diary, chronicling events and thoughts). There are blogs on just about any interest (media, food, personal diaries, policy, Bible views, etc.). It's fairly easy to start a blog. All you need is access to a computer and the Internet, and feel the need to communicate. If this is something your student may be interested in there are several free places to blog online.

Writing About Bible Passages

When writing about Bible passages, students should ask questions about every section of text. They are: *Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How.*

- **Who?** Who are the participants, the author, and the intended listeners or first readers? If there is a command, who must obey it?
- **What?** What happened or will happen? If there is a command, what should be done? What does the text say about God, Jesus, people, Satan, angels, demons, etc.? What ideas are discussed, and what is said about them?
- **When?** When did (will) it happen? (Time lines line are helpful.) If there is a command, when must it be done? If the text is a prophecy, has it been fulfilled?
- **Where?** Where did (will) it happen? (Bible maps are helpful.) If there is a command, where must it be performed?
- **Why?** Why was (is) this done? Why did (will) this happen? Why should it be done?
- **How?** How was (is) it done? How should it be done?

Other Types of Writing Assignments

Other types of writing assignments could include:

- Writing a letter to a person studied in a unit.
- Keeping a diary or journal as if written by someone studied in a unit.
- Writing a newspaper article about an event studied in a unit.
- Creating a Web site about the unit.
- Making a mind map about the unit theme.

- Writing a summary of a concept learned during the unit study.

Correcting Written Work

An important part of writing to learn is learning through mistakes. For this to happen, the parent/teacher must be able to accurately proofread and check their child's work. When this is done correctly, the student will learn:

- *Writing Skills*: Context, form, mechanics, editing, and revision.
- *Spelling Skills*: Improved through the creation of a personal spelling notebook.
- *Vocabulary*: Increased through the creation of a personal vocabulary notebook.
- *Handwriting Skills*: Improved through the practice of writing out Bible verses.
- *Critical Thinking Skills*: Problem-solving, interrelating information, effectively communicating learning outcomes.
- *Character Development*: Developed through attentiveness, decisiveness, commitment, faithfulness, perseverance, responsibility, assignment completion, promptness, efficiency, confidence, and self-control.

Because the correction of written work is such an important part of the learning process, every unit in the Heart of Wisdom curriculum utilizes the *Writers Inc* handbook, which allows the parent to correct spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, subject/verb agreement, consistency in verb tense, and word usage, by marking the error with a number that corresponds with a rule in the handbook. The student can then refer to the rule in the book, correct his paper, and turn it back in. The *Writers Inc* handbook is the one that Heart of Wisdom recommends, but you can purchase a similar type of handbook at bookstores around the nation.²

Suggested Reading

Nurturing the Write Relationship by Mary Ann Froehlich Edited by Robin Sampson ^f
In this book you'll learn how to inspire writers of all ages, from a four-year-old expressing her thoughts through pictures in a notebook, to a ten-year-old creating a memory by journaling about a birthday celebration, to a teenager venting her views and recording her spiritual growth in a conflict journal, to a mother communicating her grief over the loss of her child, to a professional writer who is collecting ideas for stories. Each of those examples involves an outpouring of emotions and personal experience. Teaching your child to write about life can help them adapt to new challenges and nurture relationships at the same time.

Mary Ann Froehlich, an established author, taught her children to write using a real-life approach, following the rules of a writing group. She posed as a mock publisher to lead her children through the writing process, from query letters to contracts and finished publications, complete with book signings and marketing techniques. Her process is outlined in this book. Froehlich explains that when writing assignments are viewed as academic exercises, the adventure of writing is lost. She will show you how families working on individual and joint writing projects can motivate children to catch the excitement of meaningful writing. They come to understand that the art of writing is a also powerful life tool.

This book is much more than a guide to writing groups. In it you will learn how writing activities and rituals can be woven through the day, year, and even throughout life. Froehlich's ideas go hand in hand with Charlotte Mason-type methods, in that she encourages copy work and journaling. Activities include ideas for family journaling, letter writing, Bible journaling, goal journaling, celebration journaling, and more. This book is not about the educational nuts and bolts of writing, but is intended to inspire and celebrate writing in the home. *Nurturing the Write Relationship* will help you develop a writing lifestyle and tradition in your own family. Ebook or paperback.

Writing to Learn by William Zinsser

This is a book on how to write clearly about any subject and how to use writing as a means of learning. It is an engaging personal journey, written with warmth and humor as Zinsser takes the reader into many surprising corners of knowledge and demonstrates that every field has accessible literature.

On Writing Well by William Zinsser

This book is for everybody who wants to learn how to write or who needs to do some writing to get through the day, as almost everybody does in this age of email and the Internet. Whether you want to write about people or places, science and technology, business, sports, the arts or about yourself in the increasingly popular memoir genre, *On Writing Well* offers you fundamental principles as well as the insights of a distinguished writer and teacher. With more than a million copies sold, this volume has stood the test of time and remains a valuable resource for writers and would-be writers.