

The Family CURRENT

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Teaching Children to Write by Teaching Self-Editing and Peer Editing Skills

By Dianne Dachyshyn

Editing is best taught as an isolated skill and from the time children are old enough to rework a piece of writing, they are old enough to self-edit and peer edit. Recopying a piece of writing that has been corrected to death by an adult is not editing and it serves no good purpose beyond penmanship practice. If you want to teach children to write well, your best bet is to teach them to self-edit and peer edit.

Focus on Isolated Skills

Children learn to edit best when they focus on isolated skills like punctuation or capitalization and then apply that skill to their writing. When you read through their many pieces of free writing, take a mental note of what needs work. It may be just the proper use of capitals. Teach a mini-lesson on that skill (ten minutes maximum) and practice it on a worksheet or by correcting a few model sentences. Always use impersonal examples. Never use your children's work to demonstrate errors.

Let Them Apply What They Have Learned

Now let the children choose one piece of writing from their portfolios and apply what they have learned to improve it. Begin with one skill and as you get good at this, increase it to two or three for young children and a few more for older kids. If they work on capitalization this week and punctuation next week, they could work on capitalization and punctuation the third week. No one can take care of everything in one assignment and children should not be expected to. Not if we want them to ever enjoy writing, that is. Of course we want them to do it all, but learning is a process and we need to take small manageable bites if we are ever going to polish off this T-bone.

Let Them Do It Themselves, Beginning with Self-Editing

Once we give them the responsibility we must back off and let them do it themselves. That means that you do not sit with them and point out each error. They get to do it themselves. It's far more satisfying and less humiliating if they correct their own work. They won't do it perfectly, but they don't have to. When you stop requiring perfection and teach editing as an isolated skill, it becomes more enjoyable and you can accept that

it's not necessary to catch every little mistake. The goal is to learn, not to be perfect, and learning is a process that takes time.

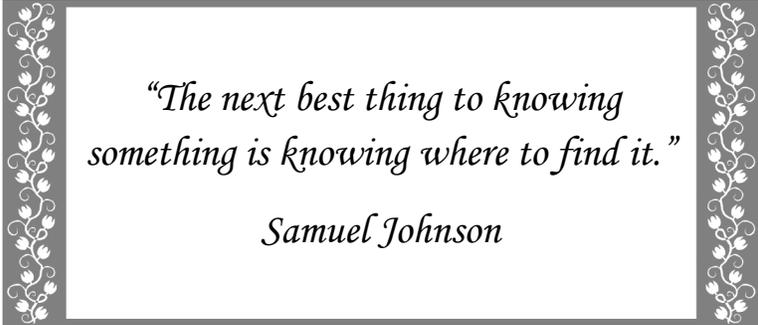
Next, Try Peer Editing

This can be a lot of fun. The kids follow the same process but this time they swap papers with a sibling or friend. Remember, you are focusing on one or two skills at a time. Each child is responsible for finding mistakes relating to those skills. If your kids' work has too many errors to address at one time, ask them to find a fixed number of mistakes. For example: Find three words that break the capitalization rules. The last part of a peer edit is when the kids sit together and explain the edits to each other (you are still not involved at this point). This is a great reinforcement of their learning and kids like playing the teacher.

They Just Might Enjoy It!

Experience has taught me that kids enjoy editing when it is presented this way. They feel good when they know that the task they are given is manageable. The reason most kids hate writing is that we expect them to correct everything at once, and that is overwhelming. Who could do it all? By focusing on isolated skills, teaching them to self-edit and peer edit and letting the kids apply it themselves, we empower them to improve their writing. Just don't be surprised if they end up liking it.

Article published January 31, 2013. Dianne Dachyshyn is a freelance writer and a motivational speaker who lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She works as a home education facilitator, helping homeschooling families plan their programs and deal with challenges. Dianne is passionate about teaching children to write. Visit her website at HomeschoolWell.com.



*“The next best thing to knowing
something is knowing where to find it.”*

Samuel Johnson

The Four Components of Really Good Writing

By Jennifer Courtney

Is our entire civilization in danger because of our impoverished language? Is textspeak a sign that we are losing the ability to construct and communicate complex ideas through written language? In a philosophy class, I led a group of high school students to come up with a thorough definition of *man* (as in *mankind*). After thinking, discussing, reading, wrestling with ideas, and refining, we came up with something like this: “Man is a rational being made up of mind, body, and soul which uses language to communicate.” Communicating our ideas through written and spoken language is one of the important differences between man and the animals. (For fun sometime, ask a committed Darwinist about the evolution of language.)

If language is a distinctive characteristic of humans, then should we not be concerned about preserving it? My teenage son often mocks me because I continue to use complete sentences, full spelling, and accurate punctuation in my overly long text messages. I continue to claim that effective communication is a hallmark of civilization and that the reduction to three-letter mystical abbreviations is a sign of its demise.

Add to these changes the fact that social media has sharply reduced the length of our communications, which makes it impossible to communicate complex ideas through these media. I constantly have to revise my Facebook statuses because I have used too many characters. This summer, my colleagues and I were joking about our attempt to Tweet quotes from David Hicks (author of *Norms & Nobility*) and Tracy Lee Simmons (author of *Climbing Parnassus*). Like Saint Paul, it takes both of these authors an entire page to communicate a single complex thought. There is just no way to break it up into a sound-byte for Twitter.

I recently read that students have been using PowerPoint presentations to deliver book reports. The principal was impressed with the graphic presentations designed by these eighth-grade students until a school media specialist pointed out that the “book reports” contained an average of seventy-seven words. It is difficult to conceive how the students could have thought much about the characters in the novels or the lessons that the characters learned, much less about how to apply those lessons to their own lives.

My own education was influenced by what we would now consider to be a primitive technology. During my junior and senior years in high school, my school (the largest public high school in my state) installed a state-of-the-art writing lab. At least once a week, English students paraded into the lab. We typed our papers into the computers and received back printouts on tractor-feed paper. The printouts gave us four different critiques to use in writing our final essays. Looking back, I am amused that we did not simply save the money, stay in the classroom, and exchange papers with one another for feedback.

So, how can we reclaim the dying art of good writing? I believe there are a few simple skills that we can recover from previous generations to train our children to communicate complex ideas well to those around them. First, our students need to read voraciously. Reading quality literature builds vocabulary, trains the brain to recognize, and later to write, complex sentences, and provides a storehouse of experiences and ideas about which to write. Second, our students must learn grammar. It is difficult for them to write a complex sentence if they do not know what a complex sentence is. Third, we must train them to think carefully about issues and ideas. Finally, they can wrestle these ideas onto paper often.

This summer, I joined a group of my colleagues at Leigh Bortins' home for a writing week. Prior to the meeting, we each selected a topic and did a bit of research. We then spent the week together divided into quiet times of reading, reflecting, and writing, interspersed with discussion and editing. Across the course of the week, we all remembered a lot about the craft of writing. One of the most important things we recalled was that there are four relatively distinct stages that must be completed by writers of all ages.

The first is that there must be an input of knowledge. Because we planned the week about six months in advance, each of us had read several books about our topic before we convened. Each participant had taken careful notes on the topics so that we had compiled a large file of ideas before coming together. For any writer, this is an important step.

Our students input ideas by reading and by memorizing. They need a ready storehouse of quality information. According to Greek mythology, writers, poets, and musicians were inspired by the muses. Interestingly, the mother of the muses was memory.

Our children need a rich storehouse of facts, poems, and stories to draw upon when they write. I was delighted the other day when one of my students compared Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to the movie *Valkyrie* in which German officers attempted to assassinate Hitler. His understanding of both has been enriched, and he can communicate the complex comparison of these two historical events to others in his next essay.

After gaining ideas, it is important to refine them through group discussion. Each morning during our writer's retreat, we gathered to discuss our topics. We added the knowledge from our research to the new ideas from our discussions and began to truly understand the ideas about which we were writing. I have taught a Shakespeare course for three years, and every time I teach the course I learn something new about his plays because I have the chance to discuss them with a new group of students.

Have your children read great literature and discuss it around the dinner table with the whole family. Form a book club and have them discuss great books together with friends. Teens particularly enjoy the time with good food, good friends, and good conversation. After students have had a chance to read great books and refine their ideas through discussion, it is time to communicate their ideas through writing, a process that requires some struggle and a lot of discipline.

I have had a lot of time to think about study skills lately as I have been taking Henle Latin Second Year alongside some very bright high school students. The primary lesson for me has been that thinking clearly and expressing oneself well require hard work. This is just as true in Algebra as it is in Chemistry or Latin or writing.

During our writing retreat this summer, the research and discussion steps were easy and pleasurable. The hard work began as we each sat down to write. After we spent two days working almost all day on our drafts, we exchanged them with one another. Then, we incorporated one another's suggestions into our final drafts. Students should practice the art of composing a good sentence, then crafting a quality paragraph, and finally of designing a full-blown essay or research paper.

It is hard work to effectively communicate complex ideas to a reader, but it is a most important discipline if we seek to turn others toward wisdom and toward an appreciation of what is true and good and beautiful. We must know the Truth, learn to articulate Truth well, and present it in a way that is irresistibly compelling to others.

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Seven Tips for Curious Learning

By Karen Andreola

A pudgy one 'n-a-half-year-old holds his toy telephone to his ear, listening intently to its stop-and-go tune. He presses a button, talks gibberish—impersonating his mother remarkably well. He toddles across the room with his phone to his ear like his mother who tidies the house with a dust cloth in one hand, her telephone in the other. I laughed when I saw it. The toddler is my grandson. Not only is he cute, but he also provides a good illustration. Curiosity and imitation are active in young children. Children are sponges, natural learners, eager learners, nosey and inquisitive. This is what the nineteenth-century Christian British educator, Miss Charlotte Mason, aimed to safeguard in her students. She took advantage of this child-nature by tailoring a method of passing along knowledge that keeps the doors of curious minds open. Here are seven tips I gleaned from Miss Mason for a happy, curious lifetime of learning.

Tip #1: Choose individual books for general knowledge.

An author with a special interest in his subject will write a book with juicy details—details left out of a typical textbook overview. Such a book has the power to open the doors of a child’s mind in ways no textbook can, because it may be full of facts, the same facts found in a textbook, but the information is presented in literary form, in a more palatable and memorable way. An example of an author who delivers facts through literary genre is Holling Clancey Holling. You can find his books in most public libraries. They have been around since 1926. A student, the average age of 10, will be intrigued by the combination of story, facts, illustration, and extraordinary detail. *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, *Tree in the Trail*, *Seabird*, and *Pagoo* are four of his titles. Add up the details and it might surprise you how they *surpass* those of a textbook. A wealth of such books is available on a myriad of topics. Freely and confidently use them as legitimate schoolbooks.

Tip #2: Take advantage of the talking recourse.

When a child enters a first-grade classroom he is trained to sit still and be silent for long stretches of time. In the homeschool he has more opportunity to chatter. Like tapping a sugar maple for its sap, Charlotte Mason took advantage of this talking recourse. She replaced the classroom lecture with reading aloud. The authors of well-written, carefully worded books were the teachers. She believed in a child’s ability to narrate (to tell back in his own words what is read to him) to be an amazing gift that every normal child is born with—and the best way to gain knowledge from books. To spark a narration, use a short but meaningful passage such as an Aesop fable, for example. To get the quiet child to say more, simply ask, “What else?”

Over time, the skill and power of narrating will carry over beautifully to the student’s writing ability. Multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and true-and-false tests do not facilitate writing. In the homeschool we can replace these classroom conveniences and the teacher’s lecture with the intelligent chatter of narration from books.

Tip #3: Do some science in the fresh outdoors.

Lessons are only as long as they need to be in the homeschool. When one lesson is completed, the next is begun. With a student’s full attention, a string of lessons can be accomplished in nearly half the time of a conventional school schedule—and with no after-hours homework. Time is available for getting outdoors.

Once a week, my children and I would take a nature walk for firsthand observation. We’d record a nature find with a sketch of it, be it insect, wildflower, bird, etc., and keep a field guide handy to identify it. The find might be as common as a dandelion, ant, pinecone, or robin. “Look, Ma, a butterfly landed on my sweater.” Nature poems abound. The time taken to choose a relevant nature poem to be copied into a Nature Diary is time well spent for English.

Tip #4: Cultivate an appreciation for art and music.

I home-educated my three children through high school. These now-adult children meet with friends who were not home-educated and are sometimes struck with how words call to mind different associations. In conversation the name Leonardo was brought up in reference to a painting on a Christmas card. A friend blurted out, “Oh, I didn’t know Leonardo could paint.” She was referring to an American actor. My children thought this was funny. The sad part is that the friend knew nothing whatsoever about the Italian Renaissance artist, Leonardo Da Vinci.

A simple way to become familiar with some of the world’s greatest works of art is to open the pages of an art print book. Art appreciation provides children a storehouse of beautiful or thought-provoking images. Charlotte Mason recommends we display six pictures of one artist’s works throughout a semester. Let the children look and look and then describe what they see. No fancy or expensive curriculum is needed.

Music appreciation is just as simple. Pop in a CD of greatest hits of, Bach, Vivaldi, Scott Joplin, or Gershwin. Play a composer’s music while you wash dishes, travel in the car, draw, or give the little ones a bath. Classical pieces and folk tunes are part of our cultural heritage. Art and music appreciation will inoculate your students against grotesque noise and images they are sure to stumble upon in their lifetime.

Tip #5: Read history that has muscle.

In the homeschool we are free to look for heroes in history. History has much to teach us about the choices of mankind and the consequences that result. The sacrifices made, the human struggle for discovery, the perseverance of invention, etc. give us hope that there are people who care to make a contribution to the world, care about future generations. Who are these people? What did they believe? To keep history from being dull or flabby, its pages need to be inspiring. History with the muscle of right versus wrong will help children develop their own willpower to do what is right, to choose to follow God and to do it with all their might. We can highlight our history curriculum with “hero admiration.” The Bible, biography, and historical fiction can supply inspiring heroes whose virtues children may choose to emulate. “Character is king,” said Ronald Reagan. It was a priority with Charlotte Mason as well.

Tip #6: Instill good habits of quiet discipline.

The homeschool is an ideal place for instilling “habits of the good life.” Charlotte Mason tells us we can instill one habit in children at a time, keeping watch over those already formed. It is remarkable what routine and good manners will do for the atmosphere of the home. Saying “thank you” and “please,” sharing, taking turns, and waiting patiently can all become habit. Speaking the truth in love, using determination, counting our blessings, and remembering others in prayer are virtuous actions that do not need strenuous moral effort once they have become habit.

A mother strives to be consistent. She knows a habit needs her watchful eye until it is formed. The greatest care will be at the onset. But once formed, the quiet discipline it brings is worth all the effort.

Tip #7: Keep growing, Mom.

To keep from feeling weary or overwhelmed, the home teacher can take part in what I call “Mother Culture.”® Homeschooling is a parent’s responsibility and noble pursuit, but children need to see that there is life outside of homeschooling. To dabble in an interest brings refreshment to a mother’s soul. How about rummaging in your closet for the red wool you purchased three years ago to knit that hat? Let the children see that Mom can take her own nature walk, sew a curtain, memorize a psalm for Thanksgiving Day, go on a “field trip” with Dad, or enjoy any number of recreations *of her choice* that demonstrate to her children that life does not so completely revolve around them. Delicately pour into your cup diversions of the enriching kind—small portions yet regular servings. Keep growing into the person God is creating you to be. Your cup will overflow into the family circle.

Home educators know Karen Andreola by her groundbreaking book A Charlotte Mason Companion. Karen taught her three children through high school--studying with them all the many wonderful things her own education was missing. The entire Andreola family writes product reviews for Rainbow Resource Center. Knitting mittens and sweaters and cross-stitching historic samplers are activities enjoyed in Karen’s leisure. For encouraging ideas, visit her blog: www.momentswithmotherculture.blogspot.com.

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*These reports are completed by parents and evaluated by a Washington State certified teacher to document the child's academic progress according to state standards.

If you are unsure of the homeschooling laws in your state, go to www.hslda.org or www.homeedmag.com for specific state information.

*By teaching you will learn. By
learning you will teach.
~Proverb*

KID'S PAGE

Summer party or craft idea—ROSETTES!



Send us your stories and artwork! We would love to see them, and you might be featured in a future newsletter! You can send them by mail or email them to: homeschool@familylearning.org.

BOOKS

- Academic Homeschooling: How to Give Your Child an Amazing Education
at Home - Tracy Chatters
- Suddenly Homeschooling: A Quick Start Guide to Legally Homeschool in 2
Weeks - Marie-Claire Moreau, Ed.D.
- Learning Styles: A Guide for Teachers and Parents - Barbara K Given
- A Child's Garden: Enchanting Outdoor Spaces for Children and Parents -
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ONLINE RESOURCES

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If you have found a particular book or resource to be helpful,
and it is not on this list, please send it to:
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