

# Writing to communicate: Start young

“My students can’t write meaningful sentences,” says a university political science professor. “How are they ever going to get a job?”

“My son struggles in his ninth grade English class,” says a suburban parent. “He can discuss the main ideas from reading assignments, but he just can’t organize them on paper. Maybe I should hire a tutor.”

“Our students’ test scores in reading and math went up this year, but their scores in writing went down,” says an elementary school principal. “Maybe we need to take another look at how we teach writing.”



Complaints about poor writing skills have grown louder in recent years, especially among educators, parents, and employers. Some blame the problem on the trend of teaching to the test that emphasizes multiple-choice over essay questions

and sacrifices writing instruction to fact recall in other subjects.

Others moan that because of notions like “Creativity is key” and “All children can write if we let them,” few schools teach grammar, spelling, sentence construction, and other foundational writing skills.

Still others point to pervasive texting and emailing that favor short, terse communication as well as autocorrect functions that fix spelling and punctuation errors and question word choice.

Whatever the cause, many observers have called for better writing instruction in schools to improve not only writing in college and the workplace but also to promote critical thinking and analysis in everyday life. Critical thinking and its expression has become essential, they argue, as we maneuver in an increasingly global society with complex technological, moral, and citizenship issues.

Consider the ways in which early childhood educators play a role in improving children’s writing skills.

## Writing in preschool

In early childhood education, writing is integral to language and literacy. Children at ages 2 and 3 begin to discern that speech can be written down, that sounds are represented by alphabet letters, and that books and computer screens contain text that reveal stories and information, for example.

Writing is also physical. Children must develop fine motor skills in their hands and fingers as well as eye-hand coordination to manipulate paper, pen and keyboard. Many activities in learning centers, including art, blocks, and manipulatives, help children develop these skills.

Preschool writing activities initially focus on forming letters, and gradually children come to understand that writing is communication. They realize that road signs tell drivers when to STOP or EXIT,



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for example, and newspapers and electronic devices provide the day's news. Teachers can promote this understanding in many ways throughout the classroom and playground. Here are a few:

- Post signs on doors to indicate restrooms, exits and entrances, and office. Affix labels to objects and toys—*telephone, window, or cup* for example—when children indicate an awareness of print and an interest in copying letters. Avoid using print as a thoughtless decoration, however. It's easy to overwhelm children who aren't developmentally prepared to take on the challenges of reading and writing.
- Make rebus charts with pictures, words, and numbers. A rebus chart at the sink reminds children how to wash their hands, for example. A rebus chart in a cooking activity informs children about ingredients and the sequence to follow in mixing them.
- Offer numerous and varied art experiences every day. Ideally art allows children to freely express themselves, a critical concept that transfers into writing as communication.
- Provide paper and pencil in the dramatic play center for children to use in pretending to write a grocery list or perform other tasks. Recognize that scribbling represents a child's way of writing to communicate.
- Take dictation from children as they talk about what they saw on a nature walk or what happened in a float-sink science experiment, for example. Children can make a book with family photo-

graphs, and you can write captions as children identify people, place, and occasion.

- When reading, point out the front and back of the book, top and bottom of a page, and left to right direction in reading the words. Call attention to punctuation (a period means stop, for example, and a question mark indicates a question).
- Point out the book title and the names of the author and illustrator. Discuss the possibility that children can be authors and illustrators.
- After reading a story, invite children to make up a different beginning or ending. This activity suggests that somebody made up the original story and that opinions may vary about how a story can begin and end.

## Set up a writing center

Depending on their level of development, 4- and 5-year-olds may benefit from having a writing center in the classroom. It can consist of a small table and chairs that are placed next to the library or manipulatives center. A bulletin board on the wall can display favorite words, teacher notes, labeled pictures, and children's writing.

Learning materials include the following:

- Paper of all types, such as lined and unlined notebook paper, stationery, typing paper, construction paper, scraps from art projects, and small strips of newsprint and butcher paper.
- Writing tools, such as pencils, ink pens, crayons, markers, chalk (and chalkboard), and colored pencils.
- Alphabet letters, such as plastic letters, stencils, magnetic letters (and metal tray), alphabet blocks and beads, lacing letters, and printed letters cut from newspapers and magazines.
- Typewriter or computer with keyboard, either of which can be bought (or donated) second-hand as long as these writing tools work.
- Handwriting charts with printed block letters (not cursive). Plan to use upper-case letters first and lower-case later.

## Writing activities

Work in a writing center is an individual experience. It provides children opportunities to play and experiment with print in a safe and comfortable environment, which may not be available at home.

Between the ages of 3 and 5, a child may have pro-

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gressed from scribbling to writing crude letters. Children may be able to write their first name and will often attempt simple words, often with invented spelling. They may also understand conventions, such as spaces between words.

Assess each child's writing skills and plan activities to meet individual learning objectives. William still needs practice in distinguishing between *W* and *M* for the first initial of his name, while Tamika may be ready to start learning beginning and ending sounds of words. Plan to start where the child is and gradually advance.

Some activities to try:

- Invite children to make a book using photos or pictures cut from magazines. Children are more likely to sustain interest in the project if they can choose a topic that interests them. Offer to write down the words they dictate, and then invite them to copy the words on the book pages. Allow them to craft front and back covers and bind the pages with staples, brads, or yarn. Leave the books in the writing center for others to read before children take them home.
- Ask children to write their names in a get-well card to a sick classmate or a thank-you note to a firefighter who recently visited the class. This helps children understand that we write for a reason and that writing is relevant to our daily lives.
- Help children start a list of their favorite words. Mike's words might include *soccer*, *car*, and *Batman*, for example, while Andrew's might be

*bear*, *purple*, and *pizza*. Encourage children to look for words throughout the year and continue adding to the list.

- Write a sentence starter such as *I like*, *I am*, or *I can* on a dry-erase board, and ask children to finish the sentence. After several weeks, they may feel comfortable enough to write their own sentences.
- Invite children to add descriptive words to a sentence. If the sentence is *I like apples*, a child might write *I like red apples with peanut butter*.
- Encourage kindergarten and school-age children to keep a journal. Explain that it will be private and that only the child and the teacher will read it.

## Guidance tips

- Remember that modeling works better than lecturing. Allow children to see you write handwritten or electronic messages to parents, for example.
- Focus on content rather than spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Affirm the child's expression of ideas.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for children to practice writing throughout the day.
- Avoid overly criticizing how a child's handwriting looks. Encourage neatness as a tool for helping the child build spatial relationships and small motor skills.
- Save samples of children's art and writing to discuss with parents during teacher-parent conferences. Explain the importance of both to later success in school.
- Inform parents about your efforts to teach writing, and suggest activities they can do at home.

By helping children learn their early writing skills, we not only enhance their reading and comprehension skills but also predispose them to expressing their ideas in meaningful and competent ways as they continue their schooling.

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