

What Parents Can Do at Home *to* Help Students With Writing

ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENT
Series



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One of a Series of Booklets for Parents



Writing is basic to learning. It is critical for essays and term papers. Good writing helps in preparing reports. In fact, good writers make good students in nearly any subject. They can organize and express their thoughts. They can think clearly and logically.

Writing is important outside school, too. Whether writing to a pen pal, composing email or applying for college or a job, students need writing skills to succeed.

This booklet includes writing games and activities. It suggests ways to help your child become a better writer. There are ideas for students who see writing as an unpleasant chore. Now you can help your child master the skills of good writing—even develop a love of writing. All the tips in this booklet come from parents, experienced writing teachers and experts who work every day with students who have trouble writing.

It doesn't matter whether your child uses pencil and paper or the computer. This booklet can help you encourage and improve your child's writing skills in *and out* of school.*



Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We'll alternate using "he/him" and "she/her" throughout this booklet.

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Writing Is Just Speech Written Down

To help your child understand that writing is just speech written down, ask your child to tell you a story. Write it down exactly as your child dictates:



*I have a dog named Buffy. He is black, but he has a pink nose.
Today we had ice cream for dinner. Chocolate is my favorite kind.*

Have your child illustrate the story and read it back to you. Each time you and your child do this, encourage her to reread some of her earlier stories. The pictures will help her remember what the story says—and she'll start to become familiar with common words. You can also record your child's voice when she tells you the story. Then she can listen to it as she reads the story to herself.

Make Writing Easy

Can your child print his name? Give him a pad of paper for writing his own notes. Keep paper, pencils and markers handy at home. Have family members write notes to each other using a message board. Or get a set of magnetic letters for the refrigerator. These let a young child who has not developed muscle coordination express his ideas in writing easily.



Involve Your Child As You Write

When ordering something from a catalog, let your child help you fill out the order form. When you are making a grocery list, your child can organize and write it. If you are writing a letter, read a paragraph to your child. Ask for her thoughts or suggestions on how you could make it better.

Write Notes In Secret Code

Children love secrets. Encourage your child and a friend to develop their own secret code. They can use it to send messages back and forth.

Practice Writing Directions

How do you make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? How do you walk from your house to where your child's best friend lives? Learning to write step-by-step directions will also teach your child how to break down a complicated process into smaller steps. Ask your child to write directions for some familiar activity. Then follow them together—exactly as written. Did he forget a step? Revise and try again.

Turn Writing Directions Into a Game

Here's a fun game that will help all the players learn to express their thoughts clearly. On a piece of blank paper, have one player draw five squares. They can be in any arrangement and placed anywhere on the paper. Then have that person write a set of directions for how to reproduce the drawing. Now give the directions to another player. See if that player can recreate the first person's drawing.

Drop the Phone and Write!

Instead of using the phone, why not have your child write letters? Try these ideas to involve your child in writing with a purpose:



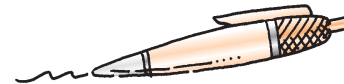
- Have your child write to the state department of tourism for information if she is working on a project about a particular state.
- Help your child find a pen pal who shares her interests. Perhaps your child's teacher or the librarian knows reliable organizations that match children with pen pals.
- Have your child exchange addresses with her friends if she is leaving for a family trip or summer camp. By corresponding with her friends or family

while away at camp, she will later have letters to remind her of a fun-filled summer.

- Have your child write her own greetings. She could write a birthday poem. She can write a thank-you note or a "feel better" joke. Encourage her to express herself in her own words.

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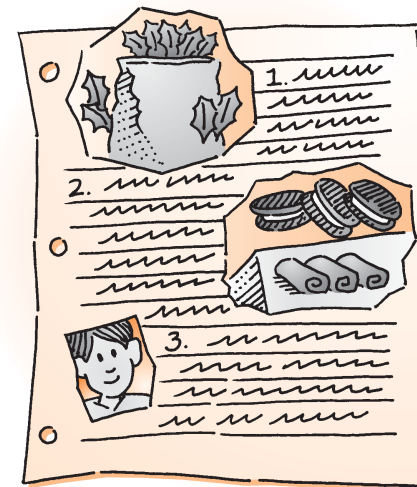
Write a Sentence-a-Day Story



Encourage your child to write a story—one sentence at a time. Buy a special notebook. Then encourage your child to write one sentence—but only one sentence—each day. It's helpful to set aside a regular time for this writing. Over time, your child will have written an imaginative and fun story.

Use Pictures to Create a Story

Have your child look through old magazines and cut out three or four pictures that interest him. Now ask him to think about how those pictures could tell a story. Ask him to number the pictures—1, 2, 3 and so on. Then write a short story that tells what happened. For variety, rearrange the pictures to see if your child can create a completely different story.



Write a Shared Story

Choose an exciting title for a story to write with your child. Try "The Mystery in the Grandfather Clock" or "Mike's Amazing Adventure." Write the title on a sheet of paper. Invite your child to write the first sentence. You write the second one. Take turns writing sentences until the story is complete. When the story is finished, invite the family to listen. Or read the story to the family during dinner.

Write Notes to Each Other

It can be hard to talk about what's on your mind. But if you and your child can exchange notes, it may be easier to express thoughts and feelings. One teen and her mom got in the habit of using notes when their relationship was going through the natural stresses of adolescence. The note exchange kept the lines of communication open.

Experts Recommend a Step-by-Step Writing Process

Your child has a writing assignment. It may be anything from a book report to a major term paper. *Your student* should go through these six steps. And *you* have a role to play during each of them.

Step 1: Selecting a Topic

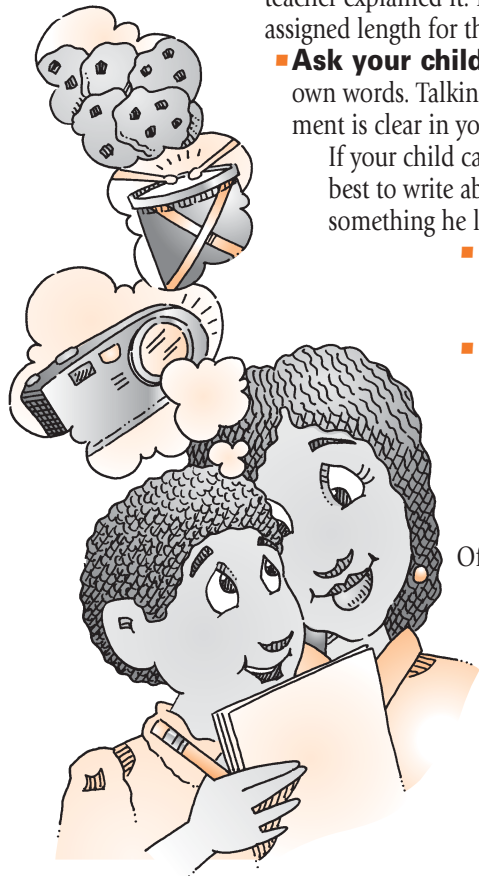
Sometimes the teacher assigns a specific writing topic. Then this first step is as simple as helping to make sure your child clearly understands it. In that case, talk with your child about the assignment.

- **Read the assignment together.** Ask about how the teacher explained it. Did she give any examples? Is there an assigned length for the project?
- **Ask your child to explain the assignment** in his own words. Talking about it can help make sure the assignment is clear in your child's mind.

If your child can select his own topic, point out that it's best to write about something he knows a lot about or something he likes to do.

- **Try brainstorming together for ideas.** Talk about your child's favorite activities. Ask him to write out a list.
- **Suggest things he might have overlooked:** scouts, rock collecting, photography, talking with a grandparent, painting, mystery stories, making cookies, playing drums. With your help he'll have a lengthy list in no time.

Of all the things on his list, ask what seems most interesting at the moment. It probably won't be hard for your child to pick an interesting topic.



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Step 2: Prewriting

At this stage, your child is getting ready to write. She is generating ideas and planning. Children need a clear idea of what they'll write. When your child is in the prewriting stage, you might:

- **Provide experiences to write about.** You don't have to take a trip to the Pyramids in Egypt—a trip to the mall or a walk in a nearby park can be just as rich with opportunities to see and do things.
- **Read with your child.** Talk about what you've read and get your child to think about how words can convey ideas: "I loved the way the writer describes the sound of the bat hitting the baseball, don't you?"
- **Be an active listener.** As your child is thinking about a topic, ask if she wants to "think out loud." Sometimes, writers can clarify what they want to say by talking about it with a patient and supportive listener.

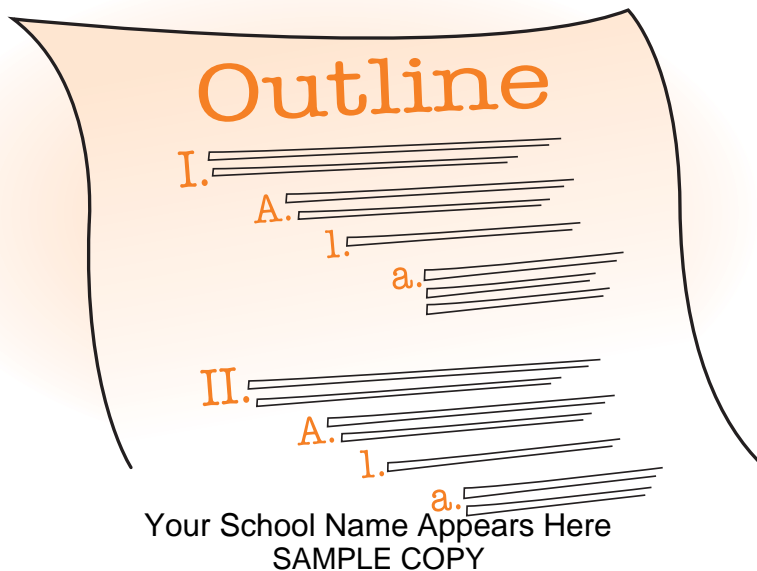
Step 3: Organizing

Once the ideas are flowing, it's time to start writing them down and getting them organized into some logical order. Encourage your child to make notes and an outline. Even though making an outline is the step most students want to skip, teachers say it's nearly impossible to write an organized paper without a plan.

- **Allow time.** Good writers do a great deal of thinking. Your child may dawdle, sharpen a pencil, get papers ready or look up the spelling of a word. Be patient—it's all part of the thinking process that goes into a good finished piece.
- **Try having your child put each idea** or fact on separate index cards. Then he can arrange and rearrange them in different ways.
- **Have your child make a written outline.** He can number related facts and ideas or organize them using Roman numerals.

An outline helps put things in logical order. Here are three ways to consider:

1. **By time.** List a series of events in the order they happened.
2. **By difficulty.** Start with general ideas and support with specific facts.
3. **By cause and effect.** Show how one thing leads to another, how one action causes a reaction.



Step 4: Drafting

Here's where your child puts words on paper. And while most of the work at this stage belongs to the writer, parents can play a role. Here are some things you can do:

- **Provide a quiet work place** for your child to write and the tools she needs to work with. A good supply of pencils and paper, a dictionary and a thesaurus are essential.
- **Ask your child some questions** that may help her think more clearly about what she's writing: What is your purpose? Who is your audience? (She'll write a different letter to the editor of her school paper than she might to the *Wall Street Journal*.) What is the assignment?



- **Don't worry about "invented" spelling.** Young writers often know more words than they can spell. Parents sometimes worry about the "invented" spelling they see on a child's early draft of a paper. Wouldn't you prefer having your child describe that big gray animal at the zoo as "enrmus" rather than "big"? Don't limit your child's choice of words in early versions of a story. You will want to help your child spell words correctly for a final draft, of course.
- **If your child is overwhelmed** by a big writing task, help her think about it as a series of smaller parts. She doesn't need to write the whole book report at once; she just needs to begin by writing one reason why she liked the book. She doesn't need to write the whole term paper in a day; she just needs to start with one paragraph. Bit by bit, piece by piece, the paper will come together.
- **Respect your child's ability** to make the right choices for her writing. And whatever you do, resist the temptation to take over the project.

Step 5: Revising

In this stage, your child reworks, or edits, his writing to make it clear and complete. It helps to focus first on the *content*—what the writer is trying to say. The process of revision is key to any written project (writers often say there's no such thing as good writing—there's only good *rewriting*). Most young writers want to skip this part of the process.

Perhaps the best thing you can do is to talk about the value of revising. Remind your child that his favorite athletes, actors or rock stars didn't get where they are by doing what they do once or twice. The pros are no strangers to repetition and hard work. And going back to make a written assignment better is a habit that will serve your child well throughout school and work—and life.

Listen while your child reads the piece aloud. Here are some ways you might respond:

- "The sentence or word that stands out for me is _____."
- "The part that's most interesting to me is _____."
- "I'd like to know more about _____."

Praise the parts of the writing you liked. Be as specific as you can: Is it accurate? Descriptive? Thoughtful? Does it say something interesting?



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Ask questions about the things you want to know more about. For example, you might ask, "What changes do you think you need to make?" "Can you tell me more about _____?" "Can you give me an example of _____?"

Encourage your child to talk about changes he is thinking of making and his reasons for making the changes. Be sure your child has the final say in all the revisions of the writing.

Revising also includes proofreading to clean up the writing and correct errors in grammar, punctuation, usage, capitalization and spelling. It's important that children learn the importance of proofreading—just as they must learn to check their work in math or science.

Here are some ways you can help your child during the proofreading process:

- **Encourage your child to use a dictionary**, thesaurus and spell-checker. Remember—there are some errors a spell-checker will not catch.
- **Make sure the words your child uses** are the best and most descriptive. Did the boy *walk* across the room, or did he *plod*, *strut* or *march*?
- **Make sure your child follows** the rules for footnotes and the bibliography. These are not places for creativity!
- **Be sure your child makes the corrections.** That's one way for him to learn not to make the same mistakes again.

Step 6: Publishing

This is the stage for sharing your child's work with others. Here are some suggestions:

- **Help your child make the finished writing** look good. Find special paper or perhaps your young writer can use colored ink. Look for illustrations that might be included to make the writing come alive.
- **Provide publishing opportunities** for your child. Mail a letter to a grandparent. Post your child's writing on a bulletin board or the family refrigerator. Or have her read her writing aloud at the dinner table.



- **Find out about how your young writer** can get something published. Many high schools sponsor a literary magazine. That's a great place to start. Or ask a teacher to recommend a writing competition. When you're in the library, look for publications that specialize in the work of young writers. See if your child would like to submit a story or poem. Getting a piece ready for publication encourages a writer to make the last edits that turn the piece from something ordinary into something extraordinary.

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Try Email

Email is great for contacting people across the country or around the world. Some families have found that email can also improve communication for people who live under the same roof.

If your family has access to email, try sending your child a message. You can praise him for doing well on a test. You can share a thought that occurs to you after he's left for school.

Most kids love email, and they'll probably enjoy writing back to you. When your child goes off to work or college, you'll already be in the habit of staying in touch by email.



Give Your Child a Reason to Write a Persuasive Essay

Does your child want a later bedtime? A larger allowance? Permission to stay out later on weekends? Have her put her request in writing. She'll need to think of the reasons why she wants you to make the change and back up her reasons with convincing arguments. After you receive the essay, you'll have time to think about your answer as you write a response.

Use Writing to Preserve Memories

If you take a family outing, write down what happened. Or ask your child to describe what you did and write his words down. Before a family gathering, encourage your child to prepare a list of questions to ask older relatives—descriptions of their childhood, memories of their school days and so on. Record these interviews. Later, your child can turn these recordings into a book of family history. This would be a treasured family heirloom, and a great gift for your child to give.

Term Papers: What Parents Can Do to Help

Sooner or later, your child will be asked to write a research, or “term,” paper. A long paper can show what your child has learned about a particular subject. Your child should ask how long the paper must be. Does it need to be typed? How should the research information be noted?

Here are some ways parents can help:

- **Make sure your child allows plenty of time.** Teachers usually allow several weeks for a large assignment like this. Don't let your child put it off until the last weekend.
- **Help your child choose a specific topic.** The biggest problem most teens have in writing research papers is that they choose topics that are too broad. Encourage your teen to work with her teacher to limit her topic. Help her choose something she can realistically expect to cover in the number of pages allowed.



- **Encourage your child to set up a good system for taking notes.** Even in this age of computers, nothing beats the index card system that has helped generations of term paper writers. Buy a supply of 3" x 5" note cards. As your child does her research, she can use one card for each specific fact or idea. At the same time, she can write the complete publication information for the paper's bibliography on another card.

- **Make sure she allows plenty of time for each step of the writing process.**
- **Have her proofread carefully** before turning the paper in.
- **Talk to your child about plagiarism.** Make sure she knows her school's policy and the consequences if she turns in work that isn't her own.

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Don't Write Papers For Your Child

Don't write or rewrite a paper your child will turn in as his work. Meeting a writing deadline is important. Taking responsibility for the finished product and feeling ownership of it are also important parts of writing well.



Of all the subjects in school, reading and writing are the most important for academic success. By following the suggestions in this booklet, you can help your child be successful in school—and develop writing skills that will be helpful throughout life.

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