DEVELOPING SKILLS IN WRITTEN EXPRESSION

This article is a summary of notes that Barb prepared for a Discussion Meeting. Her home school follows the advice of Charlotte Mason, who advocated an immersion, rather than sampling, approach to language studies. In this approach, the student spends much of their lesson time hearing, reading, copying and narrating good literature, on the premise that they will absorb the essence of good expression by exposure.

In my opinion, to apply genuine effort to any writing task, the writer must believe that:

- He has something to say;
- Someone wants to know what he has to say; and
- He has the mechanical writing skills to start the task.

We write to communicate ideas, facts and feelings. A skilled writer, like an artist or musician, will be able to convey his feelings, as well as clearly communicating ideas or facts, through his style of writing.

A child can be taught to mechanically place words on paper within the guidelines of correct grammar and spelling. However, to choose to express his feelings and create a 'word picture' rather than a flat description, requires a different attitude to his work. He has to feel that he has something to say and he has to believe that someone wants to read it before he can really be motivated to write it down. I believe these two factors are much more important than believing he has the necessary mechanical skills for writing.

Like all creative activities, writing does require energy from the writer. Other academic assignments, such as a page of arithmetic, do not demand the same type of effort from the student. There are times that each person feels 'creative' but I am not suggesting that writing exercises wait until the student chooses to 'feel like it'. However, it is much easier to develop the mechanics of clear expression when the writer really wants to communicate with his audience.

Something to Say

With some forethought it is possible to offer students a range of opportunities which should encourage them to make the effort to write down their thoughts, feelings and ideas. Charlotte Mason considered a young child to be like a sponge—he soaks up information and attitudes from the world around them. She also suggests the process of absorbing knowledge takes time, and expecting a young child to produce ideas can be like squeezing a dry sponge. Many educational philosophies suggest 'creative' writing should be spontaneous and may not be offered by the child until his sponge has absorbed sufficient 'moisture'.

The following activities provide opportunities to develop and practice writing skills:

Narration involves re-telling a story which has been heard or read by the student. The story is read only once so that the student learns to pay full attention. In narrating the story, the sequencing of events, and details that caught the child's interest, are recalled and thereby committed to memory. This provides a more complete overview of the story than traditional comprehension-style questions. The narrators instinctively repeat words and phrases from the original, which expands their vocabulary and styles of expression. Younger students narrate orally while older students can narrate in writing when they are ready. (Charlotte Mason suggests ages 9-10 for written narrations.)

Book (or Movie) Reviews: These are really a type of narration, but can be encouraged for a child to keep track of books (or movies) they have particularly enjoyed. It is interesting for them to reflect on their own impressions as they get older, and to consider the story's overall impact and value, rather that just relay the story line.

Journal: A century ago, many educated adults documented the events, correspondences and outlooks of life in a journal. For children, journals provide a comfortable and worthwhile reason for writing. They become their own audience in the present and future. I found that allowing a lot of flexibility for writing style and layout encouraged more enthusiasm from my own son. We correct spelling, punctuation and grammar together and aim for one entry a week, but that depends on what is happening—if we are busy, we miss some weeks; other weeks nothing 'noteworthy' happens.

Letters: Children love receiving mail and should be encouraged to write letters from a young age. Grandparents are usually happy to receive and respond to such mail. Keep it simple—a picture and a few words is enough to start with—this demonstrates to the child that they can write down something for someone else to read.

Nature Study involves learning about the world around us by observing, drawing and describing it. For younger children this can focus on the drawing of a specimen, possibly with appropriate annotation, then as they develop confidence in writing *they* will want to add details about the activity, location, company, weather, scenery—whatever they consider to be significant at the time. Related prose and poetry can be copied to accompany their own observations. An on-going project such as this makes the writing more worthwhile for the child.

Picture Study is sometimes used to introduce students to the work of a particular artist, or can be the stimulus for storytelling: "What do you think is happening in this picture?" The exercise can be oral or written; conscientious mothers may scribe the work of a younger child to keep as a record.

Pictures (such as paintings, photos or line drawings) can also be used for 'object study': concentrate on the picture for a few minutes, noticing its main features and as many details as possible, then turn it over and describe (and/or draw) it. This is a good activity for the whole family.

Story Telling: A valuable topic for stories in our family has been family history. Themes from well-liked stories can also be adapted to make new stories. Alternatively, a story can be re-told from the point of view of a particular character (or part of the scenery, such as a rock or tree). This would work well for Bible stories or fables, as the exercise adds to the understanding of the story itself. Children often like to illustrate their writing and I cannot see any reason to discourage this inclination at any age.

Someone to Listen

As important as having something to say, is having someone we believe wants to read our written message! Too many student exercises are skim read by the teacher or examiner then left unread forever after. To be able to make the effort to write well, we have to believe someone wants to read our work. Several options exist to provide audiences for our students:

Letters have a built-in audience. They can be written to relatives, friends or pen pals. The process of ordering information in a logical sequence is easily taught from letter writing. Likewise, the need for legible handwriting and correct spelling and punctuation can be emphasised: "We want Grandma to be able to read about this don't we?"

Newsletters (such as CHEC's TKN) provide another audience for budding writers. We now have several 'regular' contributors for TKN but are always looking for more. Alex and Stevie (the TKN editors) have both learnt a lot about writing and layout from their involvement and happily spend time during their holidays 'writing'.

Competitions: Various local shows (including Queanbeyan Show) have writing competitions for school students. Companies (such as Nestle) also run national writing competitions for older students. The details are usually available in Public Libraries.

Family Audience: It may be worth making time for each child to read his written work to other family members occasionally (thanks to Pat for this idea). Several families could combine for a mini-showcase.

The Writer becomes his own audience for journals—a record of his life. The value of this is probably best illustrated by reading published diaries that are of interest to the child, or by the example of a close adult who keeps his own journal. This exercise also imparts an understanding of the value for record keeping to the child.

Mechanical Writing Skills

This is the major focus for most primary writing curricula but I would suggest it is really the least important. Firstly, a child masters phonics. (I am an one-eyed supporter of this approach to literacy. Children can obviously learn to read without phonics, but spelling—and an understanding of vocabulary—are greatly simplified by learning a few basic rules and patterns of word building.). Then he is ready to read and write intelligently.

An awareness of written language rules is necessary for good writing. I do not think that children need to spend extended periods of time 'learning' grammar as an entity detached from real life. However, to achieve the aims of clear communication they do need to know a few basics (such as what is a sentence, correct punctuation, paragraphing, parts of speech and analysis of sentence structure).

It is one of the challenges of teaching to balance the volume of correction and suggestions for improvement against the amount of encouragement and praise. It is not reasonable to expect a child to write to the standard of an adult.

It is very easy to be overly concerned with writing style in the early stages. Encourage them to write and allow the development of individual styles. Notice what they have written and comment on the 'content' before correcting the mechanics (after all, that was why they were writing wasn't it?) Concentrate on one aspect of grammar at a time. ("Good, you've remembered to start all sentences with a capital letter.") When this stage is consistently mastered, move on to punctuation and paragraphing.

In senior high school, a 'mentor' to comment on writing style is helpful. This service is offered by many teachers and Home Education organisations (for a fee) and gives students a non-parental view of their work.

Some of the techniques recommended by Charlotte Mason include:

Copy Work was used to acquaint the student with good literature. A selection of prose or poetry is copied exactly. This activity combines handwriting with a subliminal lesson about spelling, punctuation and grammar. Learning to pay close attention to each letter and word is a worthwhile activity in itself, since transcription is sadly missing from most workbook exercises now.

Dictation: Charlotte Mason recommended allowing the child to preview passages for Dictation, on the basis that we are trying to educate, rather than test, the child. She expected them to be able to punctuate as well as spell correctly when the passage was read to them.

Oral Exercises in Grammar. Most principles of grammar can be learnt by doing textbook activities orally, rather than in writing. Once a child understands these principles they can use their time and energy to write creatively instead of writing workbook-style answers.

Ultimately children will learn to write by writing, not by filling in missing words and rewriting artificial sentences in workbooks.

Correction of Mistakes in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar should be done regularly for all written work. This reinforces the theory learnt from oral lessons and does not allow mistakes to become habitual. Try to limit corrections to the real errors—in my opinion, improvements should be suggested but not forced. If children are exposed to good books, their writing style will naturally improve with age. I'm not convinced that this improvement can be accelerated without a cost in terms of interest and enthusiasm.

Reading a wide range of well-written, interesting books should be an essential part of any education. It is particularly important in developing a child's love of literature and encouraging clear self-expression.

However, to improve your writing skills, you need to write. This is one area where the more you practice (within some well-established guidelines) the easier it gets. The trick (as in all areas of education) is to provide an environment in which our children *want* to write—then it will become a love rather than a chore.

I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for that day.

Abraham Lincoln