

Beginning Composition

Every parent is anxious that his or her child should start writing as soon as possible. We are very influenced in this by the school system, in which writing is essential from the earliest days: most schoolwork depends on a child's ability to write, and any child who struggles with writing will fall behind and be seen as 'a problem' - no matter how much the child might excel in other areas (such as maths and reading), and no matter how advanced be his vocabulary, turn of phrase or ability to retell/narrate stories which he has heard. Many children who struggle at school do so because of writing.

At home, if a young child struggles with the mechanics of writing, we don't need to treat it as a problem - so long as we are bold enough to let our children's writing develop at a slower, more natural pace. Writing (as in composition, or composing one's own thoughts onto paper) is a combination of several skills (notably handwriting, spelling, grammar and syntax) all of which take years to master. If we are aware of this, and prepared to see our child a little 'behind' his schooled peers, we can overcome reluctance to write and give children the confidence to write very well when they are ready to do so. Just as the art of writing can be broken up into its constituent parts, so composition has its own distinct teaching stages. Surprisingly, the first of these (which can last until age *nine or ten*), does not need to involve much original/creative writing at all.

Oral narration: pre-writing skills

We often find that a young child's verbal expression is much more advanced than his ability to write. Having him narrate his stories and then *writing them for him* will encourage him to use a much wider vocabulary and much more complex constructions than those he is capable of actually using for himself in written form. Later, through handwriting, punctuation and grammar lessons, his ability to write *will* catch up with his verbal ability. The great thing about oral narration is that in his own mind he will already be a confident 'writer' as he will have seen his own stories on the page. This is a much more positive outcome than insisting that a child writes everything himself and finding that in his frustration he decides he 'hates writing'. This is a very common problem in schools, especially with boys.

Parents are often surprised to read that the great Victorian educator Charlotte Mason, who had great success in teaching writing, and is so much in vogue today with home-educators, believed that composition should not be taught as a formal subject until a child was at *least fourteen*! However, this did not mean that the children in her schools didn't write until that age - they did, but until about the age of nine or ten most of the composition lessons took the form of oral narration. Her pupils would retell (carefully and accurately, after listening

attentively) a story or part of a story, a personal experience, or anything which they wished to express. The teacher would then write the narration down, *correctly*. Children love to read their own narrations thus written; they feel like real writers - particularly these days when we can print their stories for them and even add their own illustrations to make proper printed 'books'. Here are two narrations based on hearing a retelling of the tale of Perseus, one by [a five year old](#) and one by [a seven year old](#); they show how much creativity and personality can go into a narration: the children remembered things slightly differently and brought in their own original expressions (similes etc.). Neither child could have written anything as complex at this age; both, a few years later, love to write.

Narration can be used from the earliest ages; indeed, young children 'narrate' to their parents on an almost non-stop basis! '*Composition*,' Mason wrote, '*is as natural as jumping and running to children who have been allowed due use of books.*' If children are encouraged to narrate orally early on then later, from about nine or ten onwards, '*they will compose readily enough*' without being 'taught' composition as a separate subject. When pupils do write, their writing takes its sentence building, style, voice and vocabulary from the literature and poetry being studied. If the books are of the best quality, then good quality writing will be the result.

Moving on to writing

As mentioned above, there is no need to demand original compositions in written form from your child before the age of nine, so what is written here really applies only to older children. However, you may have a very keen child, and it is always a good idea, anyway, to know where you are headed!

If you are worried about the lack of a creative writing programme for your six year old because you know that in school he'd be writing on a daily basis, bear in mind that he is not neglecting writing altogether: he will be learning the mechanics of handwriting in his handwriting lessons; he will be beginning to notice punctuation through his reading and handwriting; and he will subconsciously be absorbing correct grammar and syntax from the well written books you are reading aloud to him (an 'ear' for good syntax is picked up much more effectively from listening to someone else reading than by silent, private reading - another reason to read good books out loud).

If you do want your child to do some required writing, focus on studying existing writing (modelling, as it's sometimes known). In Mason's schools, pupils aged eight or nine would be given a paragraph to study, taken from a book they were reading or a poem they were memorising. After noting and discussing any odd spellings or punctuation with the parent/teacher, they would then write the paragraph from dictation. If you want to introduce this with a younger child, you could start by dictating short sentences from your spelling or reading programme (use the sentences he is copying in his handwriting lessons).

Let him mark these himself against the original then discuss with you where he went wrong (if he never gets anything wrong, make the sentences more complex, or even try him with some sentences he is unfamiliar with). Some argue that this approach quells creativity, but the reality is that few children can express their thoughts to their own satisfaction in writing at this age. Rather, as Ruth Beechick argues in her book 'The 3 R's', after a while spent modelling well-constructed writing a child will begin his own creative writing a little later but at a much higher level.

If your child is keen to write creatively, offer as much encouragement as you can; the worst thing to do is to be over critical of his efforts and thereby discourage him (and yourself!). Expect mistakes; praise successes. Has he used unusual words, even if he has (not surprisingly) misspelled them? Has he used a very nice turn of phrase, a form of syntax he has picked up from a good book you've been reading to him? Praise this, even if he hasn't punctuated it correctly. Look ahead and know that all the great vocabulary and syntax he is using now will one day enrich his own properly punctuated and correctly spelled compositions.

Poetry composition

Don't rule out the idea of encouraging your child to have a go at writing his own poems. He'll need a lot of help and support to get going but it is worth it. Poetry composition teaches children to choose words very carefully, to listen to the sounds of words to hear how they work together ; it also helps them to enrich their expression through simile, metaphor and alliteration, though there's no need to use these technical terms yet. There are ideas for teaching poetry in the Primary Level section.

The book [To Rhyme or not to Rhyme](#) by Sandy Brownjohn is packed full of inspiring ideas. Many of the suggestions on the Primary pages are based on Brownjohn's work.

This blog, [The Solitary Dormouse](#), tracks some poetry work I've done with my two youngest children, from age 5 onwards.

Grammar

Again, Miss Mason found that teaching grammar explicitly at an early age was of little help in teaching children how to write well, and so she did not teach this rather abstract subject formally until at least nine or ten. She famously observed that a child (by the end of primary level) *'has learned nearly all the grammar that is necessary when he knows that when we speak we use sentences and that a sentence makes sense.'* What she means by this is that knowing how to form sentences is of far more use to a young child than knowing the names

of the parts of speech. A 'proper' sentence *'speaks of someone or something and tells something about that of which it speaks'*, or as she put it more succinctly:

"So a sentence has two parts:
The things we speak of;
What we say about it."

If your child is not reading fluently, and shows little interest in writing sentences, there's not much point in teaching how they are formed. If you want to make a start with grammar, though, start with this. Study several simple sentences and point out each of the four characteristics (subject, verb, opening and closing punctuation, expresses a complete thought.) When he seems clear about these, give some more sentences and have him identify the characteristics. Next, give him a few sentences with either the capital letter or the full stop missing and see if he can correct them. When he can do this, give him several groups of words, some of which are sentences, others which are just phrases (a phrase lacks a subject or a verb). Have him identify which are which, and explain why.

If he seems to be fine with this, try playing the Grammar Games in English 7-8 (it is possible to play these without requiring much writing, if any, so long as your child can read reasonably well - or you are prepared to do the reading for him).

Resources

You do not need any textbook or course at this age. You are free to choose just about anything for modelling writing which you feel is appropriate, and which, just as importantly, your child finds interesting. This might be a passage from the book you are reading aloud to him; a passage from a non-fiction book he is enjoying - history, science, football, space travel, cars...anything, so long as it is very well composed. (One way to judge the quality, by the way, is to read it aloud: well-written work always reads aloud well.)

This is a good time, though, to look ahead and decide what kind of writing programme you do want your child to follow at Primary Level.