

How to Write Well

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If your kids are anything like Jill's and mine, they are terrified by the prospect of writing something--anything. They just sit there, staring at a blank piece of paper or computer screen, tears running down their faces because they haven't the slightest idea how to start and what to do next.

This is awful, because in today's world, few skills are as important as the ability to write well--to communicate ideas and information clearly and concisely. Even our country's schools have figured this out, and today most of them are emphasizing writing more than ever. Starting this year, there's a required essay on the college SAT exam, and colleges themselves now place as much emphasis on the essay each student applicant is required to submit as they place on the student's grades.

What homeschooling parents want to know is, "How do we teach our kids to write?"

The trick lies in understanding that writing well isn't so much an art as a skill--which means that it's a step-by-step process any parent can teach once he or she knows what these steps are and how to take them. Think for a moment about how you teach your kids to cook: first, you figure out what meal you're cooking--breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Then you decide what you want to eat and make a list of the ingredients you'll need. Then you see which of these ingredients are already in the house, and if any are missing you go to the market to buy them. Only then--when you've returned home and have everything you need in hand--do you actually start to cook.

It's the same with writing. First, you decide what it is you're going to write--a book report, for instance, an essay about the Civil War, or an account of some experience or trip. Then you figure out what facts you'll need and what points you want to include--you literally make a "shopping" list. Then you see which of these facts and points you already have, and if any are missing, you know just what research--what "shopping"-- must be done. Only when you have all your facts and points in hand do you actually start to put them together. In other words, just as in cooking, the actual writing is the last step rather than the first.

Simply put, the key to writing well lies in organizing for the job. This is the missing piece that professional writers understand, and that so many students aren't taught. And that's why kids--and sometimes adults, too--all too often are paralyzed by the prospect of writing. It's because they're trying to "write" without having first figured out what they're writing and having all the "ingredients"--the necessary facts and points--already in hand.

Once you've organized for the job, turning out a first draft becomes much easier. (Here's one trick the professionals all use: It's easier to talk than to write, so before actually writing just close your eyes and talk to your intended reader about the book, or the Civil War, or your trip to visit Aunt Sally. If you get stuck, you'll see there's a missing fact or point you need to get--so get it. Once you've talked it, writing down what you've said is amazingly easy.) And when you've got

that first draft, just go over it again to polish it. This is when you correct spelling and grammar mistakes or realize there's a better way to make an important point.

Once your kids understand that writing is just a skill that anyone can learn to do reasonably well--rather than an art that only the most brilliant can hope to master--all the panic goes away. And with a bit of practice, your kids (like ours, I'm happy to report) will be communicating clearly and concisely--and acing their exams.

Biographical Information

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Herb and Jill Meyer are co-authors of How to Write, the best-selling handbook that's now available as an E-book for just \$1.99 at www.howtowriteebook.com.