

# Evaluating Writing

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This book is dedicated to parents who love their children enough to teach them at home.

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### For Parents and Teachers

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## Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge my debt to the homeschooling parents and their children who have taught me so much about the importance of love in the education equation. As a public school teacher for much of my adult life, I had great affection for my students—some I cared a great deal for—but not until I worked with my son did I realize what it meant to love a student.

I have seen so much love for children and love of teaching them in the homeschool groups that I have been privileged to work since 1990 that I have come to feel sorry for the children in institutions.

I have been truly moved by mothers who have cried in my workshops because they felt they couldn't give their children what they needed in educational experience. My experiences were so very different in the three decades I worked in public schools where the teachers made jokes about the children who had trouble learning and ignored their parents' efforts to become involved in their training.

In conventions I always see mothers carrying, nursing, loving, laughing with and holding the hands of their children. What good feelings that has brought to me! When I was still teaching in school and on the weekends on the road selling *Writing Strands* books, I reveled in all that parental love, and it helped me deal with the children in my school who would come with bruises from being trained by their parents. When I talked to my students who had been kicked out of their homes or who had run away from abusive situations, I would think of the loving relationships I would encounter in a weekend at a homeschool convention. Working with the parents of children who are loved has been a great pleasure to me, and I thank you, homeschoolers, for that gift.

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## Introduction

I am often asked by homeschooling parents, “How do I evaluate my children’s writing?” This is not an easy question for me to answer because I find evaluation challenging, even after 30 years of evaluating children’s writing and talking to them about it.

But, this process is much more difficult in public schools than it is at home. I found that when I began to work with my son on his writing, I was looking at this process differently than I had while in public schools. Public schools have problems that, fortunately, we don’t have at home. In the classroom there are standards for all children, but we know that teaching based on standards won’t always work because children aren’t all the same. Also, there are time constraints, which we don’t have at home. There are 25 to 30 kids at a time who need attention, and they all have different writing problems. In schools there are administrators who are motivated by politics and not by the needs of the children. There are curriculum demands that have to be met, even if they are unreasonable for some of the children. And, finally, there is the factory mindset in which children are seen as a certain number of bodies that have to be processed every hour, five days a week, for 36 weeks each year. When I look at what I have just written, I am amazed that any of my students learned anything.

The fact that teachers tell their classes that grades will be determined based on a curve or a class average is an insult to the idea of teaching. This means that on the first day the children are told that some of them have to fail. What an awful start for any project.

I have always found the whole concept of grading to be offensive to me and to my students. As much as I was able to do so, I kept grades from getting between my students and my teaching. This was problematic for the administrations under which I worked, but it was very beneficial for the kids.

How different it was to teach my son, Corey, at home—the only pressure I felt was the responsibility of teaching him to love and to use his language wisely. It never occurred to me that he might fail. I never once thought that he was not learning or that he was doing only an average job. I never threatened that his grade would suffer or that I would think less of his ability if he didn’t learn the material in a certain time period.

You can have the same type of experience with your child. I think that the best advice I could give another homeschooling parent is to think of your child’s training and your evaluations as you would when teaching your older children how to drive a car. You would not say to your children, “I am going to grade your driving on a bell curve, so one of you has to fail and never drive at all.” And, you wouldn’t think that all of your children would have to learn each driving skill at the same rate. You would say to each child, “I love you and want you to be a good driver so you won’t hurt yourself or anyone else. I don’t know how long this will take, but we’ll work together with it until we both agree that you’re an excellent driver.” You wouldn’t give your children a C- on driving and then let them take the car. Assume the same attitude about grading writing. Help until they are excellent writers, or at least as good as they can be. It won’t happen this year or maybe next year; however, there will be improvement each year, and you’ll have years together. One thing that makes it hard to think of teaching this way is that in writing there is no absolutely right way to say anything, just as there is no totally wrong way. There are just degrees of smoothness, economy, and precision.

There are some things that children do need that I am sure you can give them. They need to feel good about what they do. We need this, too, and we're adults. This is one of the very good reasons that so many parents are homeschooling. Their kids weren't feeling good about what they were learning (or not learning) in school.

Making your children feel good about learning to write is not hard to do. It has a lot to do with your attitude as each child watches you react to what has been written. I think of it this way: if my wife made a list every night of all the things I did wrong during the day and told me how much I needed to learn, I would run away from home.

When children write, they put their hearts on a page, and it would kill their desire to write if Mom looked at it and said, "This is nice, but look at that spelling. You didn't learn anything about spelling all year. And the punctuation! We've got to get back to the basics of commas. Let me point out all of these errors for you." These children would want to run away from writing, and so would I.

An important thing to keep in mind is that children want to learn and want to please their parents. As a teacher, you're in a great position. Find something absolutely wonderful in what your child has written and ask your child to read that aloud to you. Then ask your husband or wife to read it. And then ask your child to read it to you both because you both think it's so beautiful. Now your child will feel good about what's been written. At this point, rather than point out all the things that are wrong with the paper, you can show one or two ways to make it even better. Say that the writing is almost perfect, and to make it perfect, you have one rule that you'd like to explain. Read that one rule and explain how it works. Help your child apply that rule to the writing. This will demonstrate what that application has done to that almost perfect sentence. Now, read it again and call it perfect! Your children will break their backs trying to write perfect sentences for you.

If you take this approach, you can accomplish a number of things: your children will look forward to writing; they won't be afraid of making mistakes; they will learn the rules as they apply them to their writing; and they will feel good about what they are learning. The most important benefit of all is that they will learn to love their language.

I tried to do this in the public school and met with lots of resistance from the administration and the other teachers, but with my son it worked just this way, and it can work this way for you, too. It is truly wonderful to help people we love and who love us.



## Issues that Make Teaching Writing Hard

**Fear and insecurity** are the two conditions that are the most damaging to writing competence for homeschoolers. These anxieties are felt not only by the students but many homeschooling parents as well.

When a parent expresses doubt about her own ability to write, that doubt is sure to transmit to the child. It's logical that the child might say, "If Mom doesn't know how to write well, I don't stand a chance of learning." If a parent uses a grammar drilling program instead of a writing program, it's much easier to be competent since the answers are in the manual. I am sure that this is one of the reasons for the popularity of such grammar programs.

Many parents use grammar programs to avoid teaching writing, and this same issue is found in public schools. Very few teachers teach writing. Most teach grammar, spelling, and reading. Compared to teaching writing, these subjects, especially with teacher's answer keys, are easy to teach, and so it's easy to feel like an expert or to at least have confidence that the job can be done.

I don't want you to think that you can't teach writing—you can. What you have to have is a program of instruction that is appropriate for your child's skill level, that has easy-to-follow steps, and that leads to the production of essays, reports, descriptions, and pieces of fiction. With such a program, if it has examples and detailed directions, you can help your children become competent writers.

What you need to do is get rid of fear and insecurity. You've chosen to work with *Writing Strands*, and so you have the resources available to help your children learn to write. This book will teach your children to write and let them know that they can succeed.

Most of the following conditions that inhibit clear writing are either produced or worsened by fears and insecurities. Carefully read the scope and sequence of the *Writing Strands* series near the back of this book. It should give you confidence that if your children finish the series, they will have mastered the skills they need to be good writers. If you follow the advice in this book, you'll transmit your confidence to your children, and you'll be able to convince them not only that you can teach writing but that they can learn to write.

**Lack of motivation** is a problem for some children. They don't see the importance of writing. This condition is most often found in families where the parents don't read. I don't mean that they don't read at all. They might read the TV Guide or the newspaper, but their children don't see them sitting and reading books. It doesn't matter much what the subjects are, as long as children see their parents reading, they will want to read and will see value in the written word.

Many homeschooling parents think modeling this is difficult because they truly are very busy. But, all it takes is ten minutes every evening. We all can afford that much time when the stakes are so great. If children see that Mom and Dad sit down with books for ten minutes each night after dinner and that they let nothing interfere with their "reading time," the children will soon accept the value of words on paper.

One of the best things I was ever able to do for Corey, my son, was to give the TV away when he was about one year old. We didn't have TV in the house until he was 14. He watched his mother and father read to themselves, to each other and to him from the first day home from the hospital. By the time he was old enough to hold a book, he wanted his own. He was eager to learn

to read and just as eager to learn to write. This is one thing you can give your children that takes no training whatsoever. There probably is little of more value that you could give to your children than a love of reading and writing.

**Lack of concentration** is a problem for many children. If the problems with concentration are not clinical, there are some things you can do to help. Concentration is greatly aided by focus. The child has to know what to do, how to do it, where to do it, when to do it, and that it is possible to do it. If these conditions are present, the concentration necessary for the completion of the exercises in *Writing Strands* lessons will not be hard to handle. The lessons show the student what to do and how to do it. You must provide the “where to do it, when to do it” and convince your child that it is “possible to do it.” If you give each child a time and a place to write that is distraction free and you show him that you have confidence in his ability, then it will be possible for him to concentrate for the short periods of time necessary to do the daily work in *Writing Strands* lessons.

**Trouble with thinking through ideas** and how to present them is a problem for many young writers. This usually happens when parents or teachers have asked children to write but haven’t shown them how to do it. If you recognize yourself here, don’t feel badly; this is an extremely common problem, even among teachers in school. After teaching writing for 30 years, I can count on half the fingers of one hand English teachers who taught their students how to write. Many others gave their students writing assignments but not instruction in how to put the words together.

This problem doesn’t have to be yours any longer. The lessons in *Writing Strands* solve this for you by showing your children how to do each assignment. As long as you don’t become an anxious parent/teacher and worry about their papers being perfect, you and your children should have no trouble with this any longer.

The lessons in *Writing Strands* have been designed to help the students think through the process of producing each paper. When I wrote the assignments, I was aware that this material was not available elsewhere to the children and their parents and that it was needed, especially since most homeschooling parents are not English teachers.

**Mechanical problems** exist for all writers, but talking about them with your children need not be the most stressful time of the day. I discuss this problem in other places in this book, and you should look there if this is a problem for your children. The important thing to keep in mind is that your children will be with you for years, and they don’t have to write perfect papers today, or this week or this year. They’ll get frustrated if you point out everything they do that’s wrong. Pick one mechanical problem each week and let the rest slide. The next week pick another one and let the rest slide. Soon you’ll have covered the major issues without all the frustration.

**Trouble with following directions** is a big problem with many young writers. That’s why I started *Writing Strands 3* with an assignment designed to teach young people that they can follow directions and be successful. If you haven’t had a chance to use that exercise, that’s okay. Try this: have your children read all of any assignment and then tell you what they think they’ll be doing. Then ask them to tell you how they plan to start. If they don’t talk about starting as the exercise suggests, read the beginning of the exercise with them. Ask them again how they plan on starting. Do this until they get the idea that the directions mean what they say and that they tell the students exactly what to do. Have them start and then check that they are on the right path. Give lots of

congratulations and praise. They need confidence that they can follow directions. No exasperation or impatience on your part will ever help them.

**Resistance to writing** can be a common issue. “I don’t want to write!” is not an uncommon thing to hear in many homes. I’ve found that sometimes this is the case when the child has written and someone has belittled the effort. “Is that all you can think of? What have you been doing all this time? Did you get this paper out of the garbage? Did the dog help you write this? I can’t read this! Is this the best you can do?” or “There sure are a lot of things wrong with this; let’s find them.”

It’s so much better for a child if a parent responds, “Done already? You sure must be good at this writing stuff. I’m so proud of what you’ve done. Read that sentence to me. I think it’s beautiful.” Even if you have to search very hard for something nice to say about your child’s writing, it’s important to do so. Say good things and then find one thing that, if changed, might make the writing even better. Remember—one thing each week. Your child wants to please you, and if you praise her for writing, your child will want to write.

**Reluctance to rewrite** is understandable, especially for young writers. Rewriting is a lot of work. I don’t like doing it, and I’ve been writing for years. It’s hard but necessary. If you approach rough drafts as just that, rough, and allow them to remain rough (your children will recognize this), then cleaning them up won’t be such a big job. It’s when they give you a paper that they have tried to make perfect that they’re hurt by critical comments.

A rough draft should have lots of problems in it. It’s not supposed to be pretty, and the spelling is not supposed to be perfect. There should be cross-outs and missed periods. It’s just your children getting ideas down on paper. It’s your children’s thoughts on paper about the subject. Give your children a chance to correct all the problems before you comment on them.

A word processor is a wonderful thing for children to use for writing. It makes rewriting so easy since students can make changes without rewriting the whole paper. If your children are frustrated with the rewriting process, consider letting them write on a computer.

**Trouble with proofreading** is easy to understand. After all, proofreading is hard to do well. It takes practice, but there are some things you can do to help. Have your children read their papers aloud to you. Your children will hear mistakes when they read aloud that they’ll miss when reading to themselves. If they don’t catch the mistakes, you read to them from their papers. If this doesn’t work, have them read their papers into a tape recorder. They should then be able to hear on the playback what the problems are.

While reading aloud, care should be taken that they read exactly what’s on the paper. We all have the tendency to read what we should have written and not the exact words that are there. You might have to read over their shoulders to make sure of this, but it’s worth it. They’ll pick up the habit of proofreading aloud and thus catch many of their own mistakes. I still do this because it works for me.

## How to Correct Problems in Writing

There are two very important things to keep in mind when working with children and their writing:

1. All of us need to feel good about what we do. Children must feel good about their attempts to write.

Every time your children write, find something absolutely wonderful about it. Your children should be eager to show you the results of their labor. There should be no fear that you'll only find fault with their work. Locate the best phrases, expressions, sentences, paragraphs, or ideas and talk to them about how well they are expressed. Have them read these wonderful words to you. Have them read them to Dad. Have Dad read them to the authors. Discuss why they were written as they were. Really enjoy the beauty of the words with them. Your children will be more ready to write next time and share their work with you.

2. You cannot correct all problems with one paper or all problems this week or this month, or even this year.

If you find everything that's wrong with every paper, your children will soon become discouraged. If you find one or two words each week that your child has to use often that are not spelled correctly, that is enough spelling work for that week. In two or three years, the children will have a large spelling vocabulary at their command.

The same is true for mechanical and stylistic problems. This week work on apostrophe use for contractions; next week work on apostrophe use for possession, and the next week work on apostrophe uses.

Remember how long it took us to be perfect? Give your kids time, also.

## What to Look for: Important Terms and Common Problems

### Ambiguity

An ambiguous statement may be taken in more than one way.

*She saw the man walking down the street.*

This can mean

- A. She saw the man as she was walking down the street.
- B. She saw the man who was walking down the street.

Often, a sentence is ambiguous because a pronoun (it, she, they, them) does not have a clear antecedent (what it refers to).

*Bill looked at the coach when he got the money.*

This can mean

- A. When Bill got the money, he looked at the coach.
- B. When the coach got the money, Bill looked at him.

Ambiguous statements should be rewritten so that the meaning is clear to the reader.

### Apostrophe

An apostrophe (') is a mark used to indicate possession or contraction.

Rules:

1. To form the possessive case (who owns it) of a singular noun (one person or thing), add an apostrophe and an *s*.

Examples: *the girl's coat*    *James's ball*    *the car's tire*

2. To form the possessive case of a plural noun (two or more people or things) ending in *s*, add only the apostrophe.

Examples: *the boys' car*    *the cars' headlights*

3. Do not use an apostrophe for *his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs, whose*.

Examples: *The car was theirs.*    *The school must teach its students.*

4. Indefinite pronouns (could be anyone), such as *one*, *everyone*, *everybody*, require an apostrophe and an *s* to show possession.

Examples: *One's car is important. That must be somebody's bat.*

5. An apostrophe shows where letters have been omitted in a contraction (making one word out of two). Note that the apostrophe goes in the word where the letter or letters have been left out.

Examples: *can't* for *cannot*      *don't* for *do not*  
*we've* for *we have*      *doesn't* for *does not*

6. Use an apostrophe and an *s* to make the plural of letters, numbers and of words referred to as words.

Examples: *There are three b's and two m's in that sentence. It was good back in the 1970's.*  
*Do not say so many "and so's" when you explain things.*

## **Audience**

Writers don't just write. They write to specific readers in specific forms for specific purposes. To be effective, writers must decide what form is most appropriate for their intended readers so that they can accomplish their purposes.

Keep in mind that just as your children talk differently to different audiences, they must write differently also. They would not talk to you or your minister the same way they would talk to each other or their friends.

As you read your children's writing, think of who their intended audiences are and try and judge how what they're saying will influence those people.

1. Informal—colloquial (used with friends in friendly letters and notes):

*Man, that was a such a dumb test. I just flunked it.*

2. Semiformal (used in themes, tests, and term papers in school and in letters and articles to businesses and newspapers):

*The test was very hard, so I did not do well.*

3. Formal (seldom used by students but appropriate for the most formal of written communication on the highest levels of government, business, or education):

*The six-week's examination was of sufficient scope to challenge the knowledge of the best of the students in the class. Not having adequately prepared for it, I did not demonstrate my true ability.*

## Awkward Writing

Awkward writing is rough and clumsy. It can be confusing to the reader and make the meaning unclear. Many times just the changing of the placement of a word or the changing of a word will clear up the awkwardness.

If you ask your children to read their work out loud or have someone else read it to them and listen to what is read, they can sometimes catch the awkwardness. Remember that they have to read loud enough to hear their own voices.

1. *Each of you will have to bring each day each of the following things: pen, pencil and paper.*

This should be rewritten to read:

*Each day, bring pens, pencils and paper.*

2. *The bird flew down near the ground and, having done this, began looking for bugs or worms because it was easier to see them down low than it had been when it was flying high in the sky.*

There are many problems with that sentence. To get rid of its awkwardness, it could be rewritten to read:

*The bird, looking for food, swooped low.*

Keep in mind that the point of your children's writing is for them to give their readers information. The simplest way to do this may be the best way.

## Cliché

A cliché is a phrase or sentence that has become an overused stereotype. All children like to use expressions they've heard or read. It makes them feel that they're writing like adult authors. Many times you'll catch expressions that they don't realize have been used so many times before that they no longer are fresh and exciting for their readers:

<i>round as a dollar</i>	<i>pretty as a picture</i>	<i>tall as a tree</i>	<i>snapped back to reality</i>
<i>stopped in his tracks</i>	<i>stone cold dead</i>	<i>flat on his face</i>	<i>roared like a lion</i>
<i>white as a sheet</i>	<i>graceful as a swan</i>	<i>stiff as a board</i>	<i>limber as a willow</i>

Usually the first expressions young writers think of when they write will be clichés. If you think you've heard an expression before, you might suggest they not use it, but help them think of new ways to tell the readers the same information.

## Commas

Commas indicate pauses, separate ideas, and clarify meanings. Teachers often see comma usage as problematic, even though all writers have some comma placement rules they ignore. Keep in mind that children cannot learn all of the comma rules at once, and some will never learn them all. To help your children with commas, teach them to read their work out loud and to listen to where their voices drop inside sentences. That is probably where a comma goes. This will work most of the time, but not all the time.

Rules: Your children should use commas in the following situations:

1. To separate place names—as in addresses, dates, or items in a series
2. To set off introductory or concluding expressions
3. To clarify the parts of a compound sentence
4. To set off transitional or non-restrictive words or expressions in a sentence

Examples:

1. *During the day on May 3, 1989, I began to study.  
I had courses in English, math and geography at a little school in Ann Arbor, Michigan.*

The parts of the date should be separated by commas, and the courses in this sentence which come in a list should be separated by commas. Your children have a choice of whether to put a comma before the and just prior to the last item on a list.

2. *After the bad showing on the test, Bill felt he had to study more than he had.*

A comma sets off the introduction—*After the bad showing on the test*—from the central idea of this sentence—*Bill felt he had to study more*.

3. *Bill went to class to study for the test, and I went to the snack bar to feed the inner beast.*

There are two complete ideas here: 1) Bill went to study; and, 2) I went to eat. These two ideas can be joined in a compound (two or more things put together) sentence with a comma and a conjunction (and, but, though) between them.

4. *Bob, who didn't really care, made only five points on the test.*

Notice where the commas are placed in the example above. The idea of this fourth sentence is that Bob made only five points on the test. The information given that he didn't care is interesting but not essential to understanding the main idea of the sentence. The commas indicate that the words between them are not essential to the meaning of the sentence.



## Comma Splice

A comma splice is when the two halves of a compound sentence are joined/separated by a comma without an appropriate coordinating conjunction (and, or, but).

Example:

*Bill had to take the test over again, he felt sorry he would miss the party.*

This comma splice can be avoided by writing this sentence in one of the five following ways:

1. *Bill had to take the test over again and felt sorry he would miss the party.*
2. *Bill had to take the test over again; he felt sorry he would miss the party.*
3. *Bill had to take the test over again, and he felt sorry he would miss the party.*
4. *Bill had to take the test over again: he felt sorry he would miss the party.*
5. *Bill had to take the test over again. He felt sorry he would miss the party.*

Notice that the punctuation in each of the above examples shows a different relationship between the two ideas.

## Dialogue Structure and Punctuation

Dialogue is conversation between two or more people. When shown in writing, it refers to the speech or thoughts of characters.

Rule:

Dialogue can occur either in the body of the writing or on a separate line for each new speaker.

Examples:

1. John took his test paper from the teacher and said to him, “This looks like we’ll get to know each other well.” The teacher looked surprised and said with a smile, “I hope so.”
2. John took his test paper from the teacher and said to him, “This looks like you and I’ll get to know each other well.”  
The teacher looked surprised and said with a smile, “I hope so.”
3. John took his test paper from the teacher and thought, “This looks like I’ll get to know this old man well this year.” The teacher looked surprised—as if he had read John’s mind—and thought, “I hope so.”

## **Dick and Jane Writing**

Writing is called this because of the way *Dick and Jane* books are written. *See Dick. See Jane. See Dick and Jane run. They are running to town.*

*Magazine publishers print magazines for finely defined segments of the magazine reading public. The segments of the magazine reading public are identified by intellectual and economic indicators. These indicators are education and social position.*

This could be re-written to read:

*Magazine publishers print magazines for finely defined segments of the magazine reading public that are identified by the intellectual and economic indicators of education and social position.*

## **Diction**

Diction is the specific selection of words. There are at least four levels of diction:

1. Formal: The words of educated people when they are being serious with each other

Example: *Our most recent suggestion was the compromise we felt we could make under the present circumstances.*

2. Informal: Polite conversation of people who are relaxed

Example: *We have given you the best offer we could.*

3. Colloquial: Everyday speech by average people

Example: *That was the best we could do.*

4. Slang: Ways of talking that are never used in writing except to show characterization in dialogue

Example: *It's up to you, cook or get outa the kitchen.*

## **Flowery Writing**

Your children will use flowery writing when they want to impress their readers (you) with how many good words they can use to express ideas. This results in the words used becoming more important than the ideas presented.

Rule:

A general rule that should apply is: What your children say should be put as simply as possible.

Example:

*The red and fiery sun slowly settled into the distant hills like some great, billowing sailing ship sinking beyond the horizon. It cast its pink and violet flags along the tops of the clouds where they waved briefly before this ship of light slid beneath the waves of darkness and cast us all, there on the beach, into night.*

This is so flowery that it is hard to read without laughing. It should be rewritten to read:

*We remained on the beach gazing at the darkening sky while the sun set.*

### **Fragment**

This is part of a sentence which lacks a subject or a verb or both. Check your children's sentences to make sure they have both subjects and verbs.

Some writers use fragments effectively. Your children may do this in their creative writing. They should avoid using fragments in their expository papers.

Fragments can be powerful if used correctly:

*When Janet reached her door she found it was partly open. A burglar! Someone had been in her house and had left the door open.*

### **Modifier (Dangling)**

A modifier should be placed as close as possible to what it is modifying so that there is no ambiguity. A dangling modifier is a modifier that is not placed next to what it modifies, which is confusing for the reader.

Examples:

1. *Getting up, my arms felt tired.* (How did the arms get up all by themselves?)

This should read: *When I got up, my arms felt tired.*

2. *Coming down the street, my feet wanted to turn into the park.* (Again, how did the feet do this?)

This should read: *Coming down the street, I felt as if my feet wanted to turn toward the park.*

3. *Being almost asleep, the accident made me jump.* (It is clear the accident could not have been asleep.)

This should read: *I was almost asleep, and the accident made me jump.*

## Omitted Words

Children often leave words out of sentences, or they leave the endings off of words. You can help them with this problem if you have them read their work out loud and slowly. Insist that they read slowly so that you can catch every syllable. Depending on the reasons behind the omissions, reading aloud can help your children catch the words they have left out.

## Paragraph

A paragraph is a sentence or a group of sentences developing one idea or topic.

In nonfiction writing, a paragraph consists of a topic sentence and other sentences that support the topic sentence with additional details. A good guideline is that a paragraph in expository writing should have at least four supportive sentences, making at least five sentences for every paragraph.

A topic sentence is one sentence that introduces the reader to the main idea of the paragraph. Paragraph development may be made by facts, examples, incidents, comparison, contrast, definition, reasons (in the form of arguments) or by a combination of methods.

## Parallelism

Two or more parts of a sentence or list that have equal importance should be structured in the same way. In a list, the items must be the same part of speech.

Examples:

1. *We went home to eat and reading.*

This should read: *We went home to eat and to read.*

This is obvious in such a short sentence, but this is an easy mistake to make when the sentence is complicated.

2. *There are a number of things that a boy must think about when he is planning to take a bike trip. He must think about checking the air pressure in his tires, putting oil on the chain, making sure the batteries in his light are fresh and to make sure his brakes work properly.*

Notice that in this list there is a combination of three parallel participles and one infinitive, which is not parallel in structure. (This sounds like English-teacher talk.) What it means is the first three items on the list (*checking*, *putting*, and *making*) are parallel, but the fourth item on the list (*to make*) is not parallel because it is not structured the same way.

This sentence should be rewritten to read: *He must think about checking the air pressure in his tires, putting oil on the chain, making sure the batteries in his light are fresh, and making sure his brakes work properly.*

## Pronoun Reference and Agreement

To keep writing from being boring, pronouns are often used instead of nouns.

Rule:

It must be clear to the reader which noun the pronoun is replacing. The pronoun must agree in case, gender, and number with that noun. The most common error young writers make is with number agreement.

Examples:

1. *Betty and Janet went to the show, but she didn't think it was so good.* (It's not clear which girl didn't like the show.)
2. *If a child comes to dinner without clean hands, they must go back to the sink and wash over.* (The word *they* refers to a child, and the number is mixed. This should read: *If children come to dinner without clean hands, they should go back. . .*)
3. *Both boys took exams but Bob got a higher score on it.* (The pronoun *it* refers to the noun *exams*. The number is mixed here.)
4. *Everybody should go to the show, and they should have their tickets handy.* (The problem here is that the word *everybody* is singular, but the pronouns *they* and *their* are plural.) The following words are singular and they need singular verbs: *everybody, anybody, each, someone.*

## Quotation Marks

Quotation marks are used to indicate exact words or thoughts and to indicate short works and chapters of long works.

Rules:

1. Your children should put quotation marks around direct quotations (someone's exact words).

When they use other marks of punctuation with quotation marks, they should put commas and periods inside the quotation marks.

Other punctuation marks (e.g., question mark, exclamation mark) go inside the quotation marks if they are part of the quotation; if they are not part of the quotation, they go outside the quotation marks.

Example: *The salesman said, "This is the gum all the kids are chewing."*

2. Put quotation marks around the titles of chapters, articles, other parts of books or magazines, short poems, short stories and songs.

Example:

*In this magazine there were two things I really liked: "The Wind Blows Free" and "Flowers," the poems by the young girl.*

## **Redundancy**

Redundancy means using different words to say the same thing. The writer doesn't gain by this, only confuses and bores the reader.

Examples:

*I, myself, feel it is true.*

*It is plain and clear to see.*

*Today, in the world, there is not room for lack of care for the ecology.*

This is an easy mistake to make, and it will take conscious thought for your children to avoid this problem. You'll have to help them find redundancies in their work. There are no exercises they can do that will help. Just have them use care when they are proofreading their work.

## **Run-On Sentence**

This is the combining of two or more sentences as if they were one without appropriate punctuation. Run-on sentences should be fixed by breaking them into multiple sentences or by adding appropriate punctuation (see "Commas").

Example:

*Bill saw that the fish was too small he put it back in the lake and then put a fresh worm on his hook.*

This sentence needs to be broken into two sentences by putting a period or a semicolon between *small* and *he*. It could also be rewritten to read: *Bill saw that the fish was too small, so he put it back in the lake and put a fresh worm on his hook.*

## **Sentence Variety**

Young writers have a tendency to structure all or most of their sentences in the same way.

You need to help your children give variety to the structuring of their sentences. A common problem for young writers is that of beginning most sentences with a subject-verb pattern.

Example:

*Janet bought a car. The car was blue. It had a good radio. She liked her car and spent a lot of time in it.*

These sentences could be re-written and combined so that they all do not start with a subject and verb.

*The car Janet bought was blue. Because she liked it so much, she spent a lot of time in it.*

### **Subject-Verb Agreement (Number)**

Closely related words have matching forms, and when the forms match, they agree. Subjects and their verbs agree if they both are singular or both are plural.

Rules:

Singular subjects require singular verbs, and plural subjects require plural verbs.

Singular: *car man that she*  
Plural: *cars men those they*

Singular: *The heater was good. The heater works well.*  
Plural: *The heaters were good. The heaters work well.*

Most nouns form their plural by adding the letter *s*, as in *bats* and *cats*. The clue is the final *s*. It is just the opposite with most verbs. A verb ending in *s* is usually singular, as in *puts*, *yells*, *is* and *was*.

Most verbs not ending in *s* are plural, as in *they put*, *they yell*. The exceptions are verbs used with *I* and singular *you*: *I put*, *you put*.

Most problems come when there is a phrase or clause between the subject and the verb.

Example:

*This red car, which is just one of a whole lot full of cars, is owned by John and Bob.* (It is easy for some young writers to think that *cars* is the plural subject and write the sentence this way: *This red car, which is just one of a whole lot full of cars, are owned by John and Bob.* The subject of this sentence (*This red car*) is singular; there are just a lot of words between the subject and the verb, and it confuses the number.)

## Tense Error

Tense errors occur when past and present tenses are mixed without justification.

Rules:

1. Present tense is used to describe actions that are taking place at the time of the telling of the event.

Example: *John is in the house. Mr. Jones lives there.*

2. Past tense is used to describe actions that have already happened.

Example: *John was in the house. Mr. Jones lived there.*

3. Future tense is used to describe actions that will happen.

Example: *John will be in the house. Mr. Jones will live there.*

## Transitions

Transitions are bridges from one idea to the next or from one reference to the next or from one section of a paper to the next.

Rule:

Writers should use transitions to bridge ideas for their readers by

1. using linking words (*however, moreover, thus, and because*) and phrases like *on the other hand, in effect, and as an example*.
2. repeating words and phrases used earlier in the writing.
3. referring to points used previously.

Examples:

If your child writes two paragraphs about pets, one about a cat and one about a dog, your child should transition between the two paragraphs. Below, the idea of having fun with the cat will help transition to the paragraph about having fun with the dog. *On the other hand* is a transition phrase that helps the reader move between the two ideas.

*. . .and so I have a lot of fun with my cat.  
My dog, on the other hand, is fun for different reasons. We spend time. . .*



## **Unconscious Repetition**

Unconscious repetition will distract the reader, create unnecessarily wordy language, or emphasize parts of a passage that don't need to be emphasized. Conscious repetition is fine so long as it serves a deliberate purpose.

*To select magazines which are written on the reader's level of reading and interest, a person should select magazines that reflect his economic and intellectual level.*

This could be re-written to read:

*A person should select magazines to fit his reading ability, interest, and budget.*

## **Unconscious Rhyming**

Unconscious rhyming happens when a writer accidentally uses words that rhyme. The rhyming words will ring in the reader's mind and detract from what the writer wants the reader to think about.

*The man was feeling really well until he fell.*

The sentence could be re-written to read:

*The man was feeling really well until he stumbled on the driveway and slid under the greasy truck.*

## **Voice (Passive and Active)**

Most sentences are built on the order of subject-verb-object. This produces an active voice. If a passive verb is used, it inverts this order and makes it seem as if the object were doing rather than receiving the action of the verb.

Your children's writing will be more forceful if they use active voice.

Examples:

Active:        Bill threw the ball.

We must spend this money.

Passive:     The ball was thrown by Bill.

This money must be spent by us.

Your children can use a passive voice if:

1. The doer of the action is unknown
2. The action needs to be emphasized
3. The receiver of the action is of more importance than the doer of the action.

Examples:

1. *When we were gone, the house was burglarized.* (The person who broke in is unknown.)
2. *No matter how hard they played, the game was lost.* (The game being lost is the most important thing.)
3. *My pet mouse was eaten by that cat.* (The mouse is more important than the cat.)

### **Wrong Word**

The words your children use do not always mean what they think they do.

Rule:

Your children should not use words in their writing that they don't use when speaking. If they would never say the words *alas* or *to no avail* or *travail* they should not write them.

## **Student Writing, Comments by Parents, and Conversations with Dave**

A number of young writers and their parents were kind enough to allow me to use their work as examples of what might be expected of homeschooled children using *Writing Strands* exercises. I have typed the students' work exactly as they wrote it so you could see what their problems and abilities are. I was much encouraged when I read what these students had written. The comments the parents made were valid and supported my belief that homeschooling parents can do a good job teaching one of the hardest things there is to teach.

Matthew Cross  
Grade 2  
WS Level 2  
Assignment 7

### **First Rough Draft**

Tom the turkey

This is a story of tTom Turkey, who hid from tThanksgiving 34 days before. ΘThis story starts one day when farmer € Matthew was looking for tTom Turkey to kill him for tThanksgiving day. (farmer mattew wanted tTom for his dinner, because tTom was old and had child/ren.) Tom knew it was close to tThanksgiving day, Bbecause his father died this time last thanksgiving [So Tom] hid 4 days ~~and he was hiding~~ under a brook and waited [*there*] for a long time. [*paragraph*] ~~and a~~After 4 day's he came out and the farmer said, [""] I'm going to have you for dinner tonight

the End

### **Mother's comments**

*What does Tom do and think or say? What does the Farmer do then?  
If he doesn't have Tom for dinner what does he have?  
Does he still keep trying to kill Tom?*

## **Matt's rough draft continued**

[*paragraph*] Tom thought, "I'll sneak a way into the field with my children when farmer matthew goe's in the house and get's his knife."

[*paragraph*] fFarmer mMatthew started to the barn to put his norses in. aAs farmer mMatthew came out of the barn and headed toward the house[,] Tom called his children and ran to the fields. Farmer mMatthew with his knife came out of the house and said, "hHere tTom", tTurkey tTom," but tTom did not come. as [he] was running down the road with his chil[d]ren in front of him. Farmer Matthew [n]ever saw him again and had had to have chicken instead. thE

This is a wonderful rough draft for second grade! Matt printed it on lined paper, and it's easy to see his mind working with all the scratch-outs, erasures, and changes. It shows a good imagination and a clear grasp of the conflict and has certainly solved Tom's problem.

Matt's mother made some good suggestions to her son about this rough draft, and the effect of that help is evident in the final draft. I would suggest that Matt ask his mother go back with him to look at the four things that he would have to decide for this story. They are:

- a) Why Tom hid (The reader knows why, but does Tom?) Matt solved some of this problem with the final draft.
- b) Where Tom hid (Matt put Tom under a brook) How could this be? Under a bridge?
- c) When Tom came out from hiding
- d) What the farmer did or thought when he saw Tom after Thanksgiving Day

It's important to this exercise that the writer, even at Matt's age, understand that stories have structure. The four suggestions above are dealing with that aspect of writing. Matt's mother dealt with these four problems well. She has a right to feel proud of her son's writing at this age and level. Matt has done a wonderful job.

## **Final Draft**

### *Tom the Turkey*

*This is a story of Tom Turkey, who hid 4 days before Thanksgiving. This story starts one day when Farmer Matthew was looking for Tom Turkey to kill him for Thanksgiving day.*

*Farmer Matthew wanted Tom for his dinner, because Tom was old and had children. Tom knew it was close to Thanksgiving day, because his father died this time last Thanksgiving. So, Tom hid 4 days under a brook and waited there for a long time.*

*After 4 days he came out and the farmer said, "I'm going to have you for dinner tonight.*

*Tom thought, "I'll sneak away into the field with my children when Farmer Matthew goes in the house and gets his knife."*

*Farmer Matthew started to the barn to put his horses in. As Farmer Matthew came out of the barn and headed toward the house, Tom called his children and ran to the fields. Farmer Matthew with his knife came out of the house and said, "Here Tom, turkey, Tom," but Tom did not come as he was running down the road with his children in front of him. Farmer Matthew never saw him again and had to have chicken instead.*

THE END

### **Evaluation**

Matt has a good visualization of the story setting and uses it in his telling of the events.

He sets up the problem for Tom and then has Tom solve the problem. He presents his reader with a good understanding of the characters' actions. Matt has done a fine job of writing here.

I wouldn't, at this stage, worry much about some of the details of punctuation, capitalization or paragraphing. I would be too pleased with his ideas and grasp of the conflicts in the story line.

### **Conversation with Matt**

I would love to work again with a bright seven-year-old like Matt. I think it's really exciting to watch good young minds work with ideas and express them. Since I don't have access to Matt, I have made up a conversation between Matt and Dave (myself) dealing with his writing of this story. I would say these things, and I have imagined Matt's responses:

Dave: *Matt, I'm so proud of you. This is just a wonderful story.*

Matt: *I had fun writing it. I especially like thinking about Tom running away with his children when Farmer Matthew came out of the house with his knife.*

Dave: *Could you see in your mind the picture of the farmer with the knife?*

Matt: *Sure.*

Dave: *What did you see?*

Matt: *He had a long knife in his hand.*

Dave: *What else did you see?*

Matt: *What do you mean?*

Dave: *It's important that you create the picture you see in your mind in the mind of your reader. To do that, you have to tell your reader what you see in your mind, or in your imagination.*

Matt: *Okay. How do I do that?*

Dave: *What I do when I write is watch the pictures in my mind as if I were watching a movie on TV. Then, when I describe what I see, the reader can see the same pictures. Do you want me to help you learn to do that?*

Matt: *Sure! (I bet Matt would say that at this point.)*

Dave: *Even if you didn't see a movie in your head when you wrote the story, you can see one now, working with me. What you have to do is picture in your mind the scene of the farmer coming out of the house with his knife. If you haven't done this before, it might seem hard or strange to you, so I'll ask you some questions about the scene and you tell me what you see in your mind. If it helps, you might shut your eyes as you think about what you're seeing. Ready?*

Matt: *Yep.*

Dave: *What was the temperature like on Thanksgiving Day?*

Matt: *I don't see anything.*

Dave: *That's okay, we haven't started yet. You live in Michigan. It's November 28th. In your state, what is the weather like on that day?*

Matt: *It's cold. Sometimes, like this year, it even snows.*

Dave: *Good. If you lived in Georgia, it wouldn't be cold on that date and a farmer living there wouldn't wear the same clothes he would be wearing in your state, would he?*

Matt: *No. Oh, I see what you mean. Okay, the farmer was wearing a coat. . .I see it! It was brown and there were holes in the elbows. He had on a hat with ear flaps, and big boots, rubber ones.*

Dave: *Good! Now run the movie in your head and tell me about the knife—how he held it and what he did with it. What was he looking at? Where did he walk? How did he walk? Was it like he knew where he was going, or did he walk like he was confused? Did he go right to the barnyard to call Tom or did he call Tom from his yard? This is what you want to tell your reader in this story. Do you want to tell me now about what you see? I'll help you write this description.*

Matt: *Sure. Let's see. . .Farmer Matthew came out of his house with a big butcher knife in his right hand. He held it behind his back and it pointed up.*

Dave: *Good touch. He was hiding it from Tom, wasn't he?*

Matt: *Yah, he knew Tom was smart and he didn't want Tom to see what was going to happen. He walked to the barnyard and called, "Here, Tom. Tom Turkey, Tom." He didn't see Tom anywhere. There were other turkeys in the barnyard, but not Tom.*

Dave: *Where was Tom? Now do the same thing. Run the movie in your mind and tell me what you see Tom doing. In your story you say that Tom was running away with his children. Your reader needs to see that. Talk about what the road looked like and how the birds were running away.*

Matt: *There was a gravel road in front of Farmer Matthew's house. There was a corner and Tom and his children were running around the corner headed for a big bird park where they would all be safe.*

Dave: *Excellent. Now, describe how Tom was running and how many children he had and where they were and how they were keeping up with Tom. Were any of them looking back at the farm?*

Matt: *Tom Turkey was in the lead and he was running fast. His five children were right behind him. There was one who was little who was having trouble keeping up. He was about ten feet behind the rest of them, and he kept looking back at the farm like he was afraid he was going to be caught.*

Dave: *What about the steps of the children. Did they have trouble keeping up?*

Matt: *The children had to run and hop and flap their wings to keep up. They were chirping and flapping and hopping down the road.*

Dave: *Wonderful! Now all you have to do is put that in the story and your reader will see the same movie that you see in your mind. I have written down here what you told me. You put it in your story and then tell me if you don't think you like it.*

A conversation like this one could only be possible with a parent and child who were used to talking together. Children need to talk with their parents, to have conversations in which they are asked what they think and how they feel. That practice might make this kind of a conversation about writing possible.

What Matt's visualizing might do to his story:

*As Farmer Matthew came out of the barn and headed toward the house, Tom called to his children. Farmer Matthew came out of his house wearing a coat. It was brown and there were holes in the elbows. He had on a hat with ear flaps, and big boots, rubber ones. He had a long butcher knife in his right hand. It was pointed up and he held it behind his back.*

*He knew Tom was smart and he didn't want Tom to see what was going to happen. He walked to the barnyard and called, "Here, Tom. Tom Turkey, Tom." He didn't see Tom*

*anywhere. There were other turkeys in the barnyard, but not Tom.*

*There was a gravel road in front of Farmer Matthew's house. There was a corner and Tom and his children were running around the corner headed for a big bird park where they would all be safe.*

*Tom Turkey was in the lead and he was running fast. His five children were right behind him. There was one who was little who was having trouble keeping up. He was about ten feet behind the rest of them, and he kept looking back at the farm like he was afraid he was going to be caught. The children had to run and hop and flap their wings to keep up. They were chirping and flapping and hopping down the road. Farmer Matthew never saw Tom again and had to have chicken instead.*

If you're thinking that there's a lot of Dave in this invented ending of Matt's story, you're right. But, that doesn't matter. What matters is that Matt would have learned something about writing. The time will come when Matt won't let anyone put words in his stories, but for now he needs this kind of experience. So, if you help your children write their stories in this way, that's great. Help them while you can. So soon they'll be gone, and you won't be able to help any more. That's sad, but it has to happen.