

Academy for Writers



A program by Sigmund Brouwer.

Hello Parents!

We all know that reading and writing skills are crucial for our children, and I thought I'd share the reasons that adding a focus on story to all of the elements in curriculum can give your child an extra boost in the classroom, and how you can encourage your child to do more writing.

1. The Best Way To Improve Writing Skills Is Through Practice

Reading and writing is the act of deciphering and rearranging the symbols of the alphabet. No different than playing a sport or learning a musical instrument, confidence and skill comes with spending hours and hours immersed in the activity of reading and writing. A child who has spent 1,000 hours reading will be much better at comprehension skills than a child who has spent only 100 hours. Better yet, children who read well have an instinctive grasp of how to write well, even without formal instruction of sentence structure, vocabulary or grammar. As for writing, the same applies. A child who has written 100 pages will have more confidence and skill than a child who has only written ten pages. Spelling and grammar exercises are so boring that children tend not to want to do those exercises that are necessary to write. Moreover, a focus on the details of spelling and grammar don't contribute to what matters most fluency, comprehension, and creativity.

To make this happen, focus on the positives of the content of the writing instead of the mistakes within the writing.

2. Practice Makes A Student a Better Writer, But The Only Way To Improve A Piece of Writing Is To Edit and Revise

There is a difference between the act of writing and the resulting piece of writing. Yes, the first step is to have them practice enough to have confidence as writers to enjoy the creative process and fearlessly transfer their thoughts to paper by using the symbols of the alphabet. Students, however, don't get evaluated on their confidence and lack of fear and willingness to be creative. This only makes it possible for them to dive into writing. Instead, what matters to readers is the final product. The only way to ensure a piece of writing is clear and understandable is to repeatedly edit and revise. The bad news, it seems to young writers, is that this is much less about the joy of creativity, and much more about the grind of work. The good news, however, is that anyone can be good at editing and revisions, because all it takes is a willingness to work.

To make this happen, write a piece along with your child, and let your child help you improve your piece of writing.

3. The Single Biggest Factor For Students To Practice Writing and Editing Skills Is Motivation

A traditional focus on the technical aspects of writing and the mistakes in a writing piece nearly always leads students to become frustrated and fearful with the writing process. The first reason is the lack of fun and creativity involved. The second reason is that the spelling of the English language is exceedingly difficult. "Laughter" and "Daughter" are pronounced much differently despite the fact that the only differences are the "L" and "D" at the beginning of each word. Why does "Water" and "Daughter" rhyme despite the differences in spelling? Why is "Gh" in "Tough" pronounced differently than "Gh" in "Ghost?" The third reason is that the first draft of any piece of writing will need a minimum of three drafts to become a polished final product (If not more!). For beginning writers who don't understand this process, there is a sense that they have no chance at all of handing something to the teacher that is good enough, so why even try? The resulting sense of inadequacy is very de-motivational. Students become reluctant to do the pages and pages of writing it takes to become better at the process. The key to turning this around is by reducing the de-motivation and to find a key that will motivate students in all types of writing.

To make this happen, read your child's writing out loud so that the focus is on the content, not the mistakes.

4. The Best Way to Motivate Students Is By Understanding Humans Are Wired For Story

"Narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of planning, of explaining. . . most of our experience, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories." —Dr. Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind*.

Stories allow us to remember facts, to place facts in context, and to deliver facts with emotional context. We tell stories, we dream stories, we learn through stories and we love stories delivered in many ways — from movie screens, to the pages of books, cartoons, and jokes. In short, stories are central to human existence. All children can tell a story. By focusing on the stories that are delivered through writing, we give students a much better reason to do the work that comes with writing, especially when we place more emphasis on the story than on the technical mistakes they find discouraging. Yet there is an even better reason to focus on story.

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5. Story Gets Its Power Because Humans Connect Through the Heart

While our ability to reason and analyze is one of the fundamentals that set humans apart from all other species, humans are still driven by emotions that often defy rationality. And when we connect, it is primarily through emotions — joy, love, anger, fear. All great stories have one thing in common. Like great songs, great stories grab our feelings. The format to a story is simple. It begins with a problem, the problem gets worse, and then the problem is resolved. Yet the problem must engage us emotionally, or we lose interest.

Because humans connect through the heart, we tell stories. We are seeking to connect with our audience. We want our listeners/readers to laugh or to groan or to wince or to lean in with curiosity.

When a child delivers a story to us on paper, instead of relying on the traditional way of criticizing it, the single best thing we can do to get that child to write again is to show the emotional reaction he or she is seeking. Laugh at a child's story and you will get more stories so the author can hear you laugh again.

6. The Amazing Things That Happen When You Understand That Writing Is A Delivery System For Story

It seems the phrase we hear and repeat is this: Write a story. Yet we don't write stories. We daydream stories. Then we deliver the story through writing skills. The most important thing to understand about this phrase is that storytelling is a separate skill from writing. Story is a sequence of events. Writing is a sequence of words.

Writing — the process of using symbols of the alphabet to set words down on paper in a clear and understanding sequence — is the delivery system. Story — a problem that engages us as the main character eventually overcomes the problem — is the content.

Both skills are needed. No matter how brilliant the writing is, if the author doesn't deliver something worth reading, we are disappointed by the writing. Conversely, no matter how great the story is, if the writing is poor, we won't have a chance to enjoy the story. Once a young author understands this, the motivation of sharing a fun story then becomes the motivation to make sure that the writing is good enough to deliver that story.

7. Story Makes All Writing More Effective — Narrative, Expository, Persuasive

Curriculum places requirements on students to come up with assignments such as narrative writing, expository writing, persuasive writing, essay writing, letter writing, descriptive writing, and journal writing. These labels make it easy to overlook a single fact. There are no different types of writing. Writing is the delivery system and the same writing skills in delivery of a narrative (story) are the same writing skills used in a journal piece. The demands of sentence structure, clarity, punctuation, grammar, and the use of powerful verbs and adverbs are identical all across the spectrum.

What shifts from assignment to assignment is the form of how the content is delivered. Essays are structured differently than journals, for example. There are two important things to understand from this. A student who is motivated by the joy of story to write one hundred pages of stories — no matter how silly the stories are — is accumulating one hundred pages of writing skills that will transfer to each of the new curriculum writing assignments. And secondly, of equal importance, students who weave elements of story into each different assignment will get better grades because each piece of writing is made stronger by using stories to engage their readers. Expository writing that uses true stories over a series of boring facts is a foundation for the best in non-fiction books that reach us in the real world. Using stories to persuade someone to a certain point of view is the most powerful way to influence a person's opinion.

To sum up the seven secrets: story is the best way to motivate our children to read and write, and it is the engine to drive improved literacy, comprehension, and fluency skills.

--Sigmund Brouwer