

Writing Well

By Risa Okin

Inspiration

My love for writing was sparked in the 4th grade by an enthusiastic volunteer who mentored a small group of us in his weekly story writing class. He relayed his appreciation masterfully and I took to it. Maybe it was the elegance of his English accent, or perhaps getting to work outside of the classroom gave me a sense that we were doing important work. A passionate teacher can inspire students to notice a clever turn of phrase or a lovely description, to keep at it despite the challenges of writing well. I'm glad I did. My writing skills have led me to a variety of interesting jobs from speech writer to entertainment publicist, to elementary school teacher and, most recently, to small business owner (KidWritersLA).

Perspiration

Writing well is among the most important skills a student can develop. In fact, being able to express ideas clearly in writing holds value long after graduation. Unfortunately, it's a subject that most K-12 schools don't handle well. Effective writing instruction requires time: time to teach key concepts, time to read student work, time to help students build and improve on their skills. Good writers aren't made overnight. Students need lots of practice, regularly, and this isn't happening much.

Voice

The best kind of writing instruction makes clear to students that writing is part science and part art. Teaching structures is important, but helping students develop their voices must come first. Luckily, we all have many of the tools needed to succeed, including inherent artistic sensibilities. Students of all ages recognize when a piece of writing feels good to the ears or memorable to the intellect. Writing gives voice to their unique life experiences which are reflected in their stories, essays, persuasive letters and other written products. Originality is a writing virtue. What's more, when your child has something to say, the blank page is always willing to listen!

Thinking and Communicating

Learning to write well is akin to learning to think well. What a wonderful antidote to the mind-numbing effects of screen-time and the mental passivity that is encouraged. Learning to defend ideas by supporting them with reasons, details and facts forces the writer to grapple with content and seek clarity more than any other subject. Writing also teaches students how to reach different audiences, a critical skill in today's global environment.

Get Involved - A Few Suggestions from a Writing Teacher

- Think differently. Writing is a process, similar to sculpting or building. It takes brainstorming and planning and persistence. The process often starts with a mess (of words, ideas and thoughts). Eventually, the raw materials meld into a cohesive product. Don't expect your children to sit down and produce quickly. Instead, think of words and phrases as building blocks and encourage experimenting - the stops and starts, cross outs and revisions that can turn an average piece into an exceptional one.
- Try a writing assignment your child is given, alongside him or her, even if you simply organize how you'd approach it, or you just draft a first paragraph. I work on the assignments I give my students to highlight process and have noticed that when I don't write with them, their engagement lessens. What a lesson! I'm delighted to see that current pedagogical research supports this suggestion.
- Create together at a neutral locale: Grab a hot chocolate at Starbucks and engage her/him/them with a phrase like, "The next three people to walk in the door will be characters in our story." Set a timer for 10 minutes and get to it. When the timer sounds, share with one another. This should not be a competition. In fact, it's helpful to share the challenges you faced and to ask for feedback on your story. Your child(ren) will love that you value their input and you'll be modeling the fact that writing well is a challenge for all writers. Be encouraging and complimentary and they'll love the experience.

If you're having trouble inspiring your child(ren) to write, I'm here to help. I offer one-on-one or group writing instruction for students aged 8 to 18. Some of the groups I work with are formed by parents who want small creative or expository workshops for their children. I also organize themed groups and advertise them on my website. My writing studio is located in Culver City, but I work with students virtually as well. For more information, go to KidWritersLA.com or contact me at 310-801-9170 or kidwritersla@gmail.com.