

## Elements of Writing Instruction I

### Purpose of this session:

1. To **demystify the goals for any writing program** by clearly defining goals for children at all levels.
2. To **encourage parents** that they can supervise the writing program they choose for their students.

### General assertions:

1. Writing<sup>1</sup> is a process.
2. Over their twelve years of grade school, children should learn to write by...
  - Understanding first the basics of the writing process (pre-write, draft, polish, and present)
  - The construction of simple sentences
  - How to properly assemble (organize) sentences into paragraphs
3. The learning process advances as the children grow:
  - Students master ever more complex sentence and paragraph constructions.
  - They also learn to organize paragraphs into longer works: reports, biographies, essays, short stories, etc.
4. The mastery of the writing process includes:
  - An understanding of complex sentence syntaxes (grammar) and styles
  - Paragraph organization and transitions between these
  - Knowledge of when to use specific organizational structures and writing styles to communicate ideas effectively.

**Writing II:** The follow-up session to this one attempts to show parents how to correct work for the specific elements we outline in this Writing I session.

### Goal Setting: There are four basic elements that comprise good writing

1. Strong sentences
2. Solid paragraphs
3. Skillful use of transition words and sentences to connect paragraphs
4. General structure and style

**NOTE:** For most students, the end game should be the analytical essay. While fiction attracts many students, and has its place, most students will write far more non-fiction during their academic and vocational lives.

### Goal One: Sentence Construction

#### Definitions: How can you grade without a standard?

**Classic:** A group of words that express a complete thought. It begins with a capital letter and ends with punctuation. To be a complete sentence, it must contain a subject and a verb.

**Newer:** "A sentence is a grammatical unit that is composed of one or more clauses."<sup>2</sup> This begs the question, "What is a clause?" "A clause is a grammatical unit includes, at minimum, a predicate and explicit or implicit subject."

1. However we define a sentence, make sure it is clear, that your child knows it, and that you hold him to it!
2. Your definition helps your child with structure of sentences. As s/he grows, be sure s/he understands thoroughly the grammatical constructions (and correct punctuation thereof). Buy a good handbook and teach your children to use it!

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<sup>1</sup> By "writing" we are, in this teaching, talking exclusively about expressing ideas. While grammar is mentioned in this discussion (though it could be treated separately) the content quality of the writing is not in view during this teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from: << <http://www.sil.org/linguistics/GlossaryOfLinguisticTerms/WhatIsASentence.htm>>>

**Sentence content**

As they grow: much of grade school writing instruction consists of teaching students first the basics of strong and simple sentences (including the grammar thereof) and then teaching the structures, uses, and grammatical technicalities of increasingly stronger and more complex sentences.

Strong sentences have recognizable elements, which you can teach (and grade).

1. Teach younger students that sentences are stronger when students use concrete, specific words.
  - Play word games, and when correcting written work, point out weaker words, or instances where students have done a good job using stronger language.
  - Word game example: **The flower was in the vase on the table.**
2. As students grow into the middle years, we begin to teach them about a **variety of increasingly complex sentences**.
  - We should introduce them to specific clause and phrase constructions, and the various uses of different constructions.
  - A good grammar handbook is essential in these years for the teaching parent.

Examples of variety in sentence structure and complexity:

- The man ran down the street and feverishly checked his watch. (compound verb)
- Feverishly checking his watch, the man ran down the street. (adverbial clause)
- Running down the street, the man feverishly checked his watch. (introductory phrase)

3. In high school, mastery of the most complex sentences is approached. Additionally, students learn how various styles of sentences effectively communicate different ideas, and how to correctly punctuate these ever-more-complex sentences.

**Goal Two: Paragraph Construction**

**Definition:** A group of sentences that collectively express a single idea, begin with a topic (or transitional) sentence, and have a feeling of ending (or conclusion).

Generally, paragraph structures include:

1. An opening sentence. Can have several forms:
  - Teach young children to begin with a “hook” when beginning stand-alone paragraphs.
  - Many paragraphs simply have an opening assertion, or topic sentence.
  - Older students will need to know how to include a transitional assertion that depends on points made in the preceding paragraph.
2. The body of the paragraph: should contain *only* sentences that explain, inform, or support the argument of the opening statement/topic sentence.
  - Much instruction in early years centers in helping students to remain “on topic.” (Doggies!)
  - Middle-stage students perfect the interesting arrangement of data in the paragraph, and should also work at mastering transitions between paragraphs.
  - Older students learning to write analytical essays must see that points they include support the assertion that began the paragraph. During high school years, they should master basic paragraph construction.
3. The conclusion of the paragraph
  - Ends with a thought that collects and finishes the meaning of the gathered sentences. OR...
  - Transitions to the next paragraph (older students).
  - Younger students writing stand-alone paragraphs should focus on making their concluding sentences a true stopping point.
  - The older the student grows, the more s/he needs to consider the flow of the paper as a whole, and whether the start and/or end of the paragraph requires transitional constructions.

**Goal Three: Connecting Paragraphs Skillfully**

As with other writing skills, students grow in these proficiencies over the years.

1. Students should be introduced to a variety of writing genres,<sup>3</sup> and how they are typically organized.
2. Each genre has its own unique organizational scheme, which students should learn.
3. Parents should teach students how to organize their thoughts in pre-writing sessions, organizing their ideas according to accepted norms, such that proper forms are achieved.
4. As we said above, as they grow older, students should learn an arsenal of transition words and techniques, and become familiar with their various uses.<sup>4</sup>
  - Writing handbooks often include lists of these words.
 

Examples:

    - Adding another point: as well, also, in addition, furthermore... etc.
    - Contrary to fact: but, on the other hand, however, nevertheless ... etc.
    - Results of the previous argument: therefore, and so, since... etc.
    - Concession: of course, naturally, one sees that, it is true that, etc.
    - Resume argument after concession: as we were saying, to continue, to return to, etc.
  - Beyond a list of words, though, students need to be taught how and when transitional sentences or phrases are needed. Though a paragraph has a feeling of ending, it can also anticipate the next point to be made. As children work through high school, smooth transitions should be a major focus in your grading.
  - A parent can best teach about transitions by noticing and pointing out when writing is choppy for lack of them, and helping students insert helpful sentences or phrases as needed.
  - It seems like simple repetition of proper use of transitional words/sentences is the best teaching method. Very simply, this just takes time/maturity.

**Goal Four: Elements of Style and Structure**

An understanding and use of various styles is the fourth basic writing skill that students should master during their grade school careers.

1. Styles are seen in the structures of sentences, paragraphs, and overall works.
2. Styles affect the delivery of the writer's message. Students need to know how they should be used.
3. Various written communication genres traditionally employ various structures that amount to styles.
 

Examples:

  - Expository essays almost always employ a five-paragraph format.
  - A narrative piece tells a story. There is not set number of paragraphs required.
  - A newspaper article summarizes the main facts of the story, then proceeds to give detail, with the smallest details placed last in the article. Again, though, no set number of paragraphs is used.
  - Compare/contrast essays typically employ the writer's choice of four-or-five-paragraph constructions.
4. Style is one of the most difficult things to teach: to some degree, a writer's style is a gift. However, various styles can be copied, and all styles have specific effects. Students can, at the very least, notice styles (and copy after analyzing them).
 

Examples:

  - Hemingway's short, terse style expresses well the sad, despairing worldview of his characters.
  - The lyrical and conversational style of A. A. Milne, in Winnie the Pooh stories makes it endearing and approachable to young listeners/readers.
  - The dense and academic style of a typical upper-level text book tells the advanced student what he needs to know. No frills added!

<sup>3</sup> Genres include such things as: reports, essays, short stories, newspaper articles, technical manual, letters (friendly and business), biographies, formal outlining, narrative writing, persuasive writing, compare/contrast pieces, and expository works.

<sup>4</sup> Skillful and advanced paragraph organization relies on a thorough understanding of sentence construction. Technically, a discussion of transition words and phrases belongs to the subject of sentence and paragraph construction, but they are employed well if the student understands their use in the overall structure of the work, so I include them here. It's a bit of the chicken/egg syndrome. ©

### **The Case of Analytical Essays as the Writing Instruction End Game**

Some writing manuals for younger children call simple five-paragraph reports “essays.” This is not what we mean by the term “analytical” essay.

#### Physical development and analytical essay writing:

Research shows that before puberty, children simply don’t have the “gray matter” to learn *analytical* essay writing. Mature abilities are required:

1. The formulation of a thesis (debatable opinion, not unlike a scientific theory).
2. The selection of supportive data from research.
3. The organization of this data into well constructed, interesting paragraphs.
4. The points must flow within and between the paragraphs, and the paragraphs must be arranged in a logical progression.
5. All data in these paragraphs must support the thesis, in essence, proving it.
6. Finally, the mature essay will end with a “synthesis” or original conclusion that arises from the analysis.

In Writing Session II, we’ll discuss the anatomy of an *analytical* essay in detail and learn to correct key elements of sentences, paragraphs, and several types of essays. Below is a summary of essay basics.

#### Why Teach Analytical Essay Writing?

Teaching *analytical* essay writing is essential to a classical high school education. There is no substitute for this skill. Learning this skill thoroughly and well has a multitude of benefits. Here are a few:

1. Essay composition schools the student to be well organized in writing.
  - Essay composition requires students to pre-write all pieces.
  - Students must carefully select facts and place them as supportive points in well-organized arguments.
  - Students must organize paragraphs such that they flow logically throughout the piece.
2. The writing process requires that the student thinks logically, since students must use facts to support arguments, not present wild, vague, unsupported assertions.
3. Repeated assignments of essay composition hone the student’s ability to analyze and synthesize facts and arguments, and to express opinions in the form of persuasive, fact-based arguments. Thus, essay writing is great training for evangelism.
4. It is a necessary skill for success at colleges.

#### Analytical essays are used on many college tests because they show teachers two basic and important things:

1. Content: Do the student understand the substance of the lesson?
  - A strong thesis statement and good supportive categories need to have good substance
  - Lots of facts that support the author’s position should be included
  - Solid reasoning: how the student marshals his facts
  - Correct selection of facts—sticking to the question at hand and including all important data
  - Conclusions that hit home
2. Writing: How well can you express what you know?
  - Use strong and interesting sentences
  - Solid paragraph constructions
  - Skillful use of transition words/sentences—joining paragraphs skillfully
  - General structure—arranging paragraphs in the proper order for the required genre.
  - Style: is it appropriate for the piece?

Come to Session II and learn how to both teach and correct paragraphs and essays!

## Summary of Basic Writing Skills

	Sentences	Paragraphs	Grammar	Organization
<b>Grades 1-3</b> (Readers only)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Subjects and verbs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agreement of subjects &amp; verbs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Simplest punctuation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Basic structures introduced.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lots of help with prewriting.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cluster and describe: use concrete subjects and lots of practice.</li> </ul>	<p>Four parts of speech introduced</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Nouns</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Verbs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Adjectives</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Adverbs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Indicative and interrogatory sentences.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introduce graphic organizers; give lots of help using them</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introduce/help with basic organization of all writing assignments</li> </ul>
<b>Grades 4-6</b>	<p>Over these years develop abilities to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Choose strong, concrete words</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Add simple clauses properly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Practice simple inversions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Master more complex punctuation as sentences grow in variety.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Well structured, independent writing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Start with a "hook"</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> End with a conclusion</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Begin to use increasingly more complex sentences towards the end of these years.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Eight parts of speech memorized and defined</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Simple clauses practiced and properly punctuated.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introduce quotation marks, and structure of dialogue.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Practice with graphic organizers such that the student needs less and less help with them.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strong paragraphs are mastered</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Summarization skills practiced</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Simple five-paragraph reports introduced</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Introduce formal outlining &amp; note taking</li> </ul>
<b>Jr. High</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A variety of clauses mastered during these years: subordinate, introductory, dependent, etc.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Master punctuation rules as you study sentence structures</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Develop a sense of how sentence structure affects style &amp; message</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Strong paragraphs in a variety of applications.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to craft form to fit function increasing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Study of transitions between paragraphs. Practice with this.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Grammar of more complex constructions mastered: clauses, phrases, etc.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Proper MLA citation introduced and practiced in research papers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Formal outlining mastered as a tool for organizing thoughts and class notes</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Graphic organizers used completely independently.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students learn basic expository essay formats, and practice compare/contrast templates</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Self-proofing skills develop</li> </ul>
<b>Sr. High</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> In connection with literature studies, become familiar with a wide variety of sentence styles and the effects they produce</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Final mastery of all punctuation rules: commas, quotations, colons, semicolons, apostrophes, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Should be mastered by this age.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Transitions and dialogue continue to be developed.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Style is more and more conscious and purposeful.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Most students will have the fundamentals down by now; they will go on to foreign language study.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Master most functions of eight parts of speech, as well as lesser known grammatical constructions (gerunds, gerundives, etc.)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mastery of clauses, phrases, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pre-writing, drafting, self-proofing, polishing and MLA citation rules are mastered during this years.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Students master various formal essay templates and feel comfortable producing them.</li> </ul>