

How to Instil a Love for Writing in Your Child

Reading Comes First

The first step to instilling a love for Writing in your child is to instill a love for Reading. It's not that your child needs to read a lot to write well, but they do need to be able to read well. Poor reading skills limit your child's ability to learn writing. So your first priority as a parent should always be teaching your child to be a strong reader. As they reach this milestone, you can then begin to teach them to write. In fact learning to write will give your child a greater appreciation for what they read and this should establish a positive feedback loop where stronger writing enables better reading. To reach the very heights of being a good reader, one also needs to be able to write well.

For this article, I will assume that your child is already a reasonably strong reader. Strong readers are children who are able to quickly comprehend a story or an article and interact with it. They will be able to compare articles and stories and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Writing in fact is the perfect method for thinking critically.

Reading a lot is Good, but not Enough

Children who read a lot are not necessarily strong readers. We have encountered children who tell us (confirmed by their parents) that they read a good deal of books. Nonetheless when we test them on their comprehension and the like, they do not perform that well. These students would greatly benefit from practicing and learning writing, as it will improve their reading skills by encouraging an interaction with their reading. Their reading will improve with a focus on developing their writing skills.

Even the Best of our Students Need Work

My experience teaching first year Undergraduates at UCLA and other Universities clearly demonstrated that most first year students did not arrive sufficiently prepared. Most of them could not write a clear and basic research essay well. Common mistakes included not answering the question, not providing a structure, not creating a flow for the reader, not knowing how to cite others' work using footnotes, difficulty paraphrasing, and the like. It was frankly surprising how many of our "best" students, who had near

perfect GPAs, SATs, entrance papers, and had cleared so many hurdles, didn't have rather basic writing skills.

Practice Makes Perfect

To be honest, I didn't really gain the skills to write well until I entered University. How did I gain them? Practice, practice, practice ... I wrote many, many essays, gradually working up to 3,000 words and then 5,000 words. After years of writing research papers I undertook the then daunting task of a 10,000 word thesis on the Argentine Currency Board for my Honors year. Based upon the quality of this paper I was able to secure entry into the London School of Economics to begin a PhD comparing Argentine and Australian economic histories, where I would figure out an original topic and then write a 100,000 word thesis containing original research. By this point, I found it easy to crank out 10,000 word research papers. The process for my learning was simply to do it many, many times with educated guidance, but a lot of my learning was simply from doing. For instance I experimented with a wide variety of techniques for organizing and utilizing research. Some methods worked better for me than others. Ultimately what I learned was that writing is mostly about organizing and formulating one's ideas and thoughts and using research to guide them.

Writing is all about Thinking

The writing process helps us think. For example a student writing a research paper will think about their topic and hypothesize a basic answer to the question, then go out and read widely, and then come back to write about it. If they do it well, they should develop and discover insights as they proceed. They may discover that certain arguments are illogical or unlikely when one considers the comparisons. It may be that we discover that our own original hypothesis was incorrect, which is always a good discovery because it may be that what seems correct or obvious is not in fact. For example I remember evaluating the effects of Zero Tolerance Policing under New York's Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. Crime had dropped precipitously under this policy and it seemed, prima facie, obvious that the policy had been greatly successful. This was until you compared US cities and found that most US cities had experienced the same drop in crime at the same time using a very wide variety of policies in regards to policing. What had seemed obviously correct at the outset, became more dubious as I proceeded. I learned a great

deal about many topics from going through the exercise of writing research papers on them, as writing forced me to think through the issues and lay them out logically.

Edit and re-Edit

As we edit our essays we often think of new ideas and the like. Writing mutates constantly and is like an ongoing debate within oneself. I often found it best to come back to an essay that I thought was complete about a week later. All sorts of errors and inconsistencies would then become very obvious, but I could never see them immediately after I had finished the essay. Unfortunately the essay you are reading was written in one day and is therefore likely to need some revising next week!

Threading the Narrative

One thing I learned when I was writing my PhD was that it was impossible to not take a position. Trying to incorporate all sides of an argument made it impossible to thread a narrative and the writing became increasingly disjointed and hard to lay out. For the reader, it was especially horrible. Encourage your child to consider all sides to a topic, but push them to take a position. Only by taking a position can they create the structure to write a paper on the topic.

Writing Encourages Critical Thinking

Critical thinking improves our reading ability and is best done through the act of writing, as the author is forced to reflect upon what they have read. Undergraduate students typically spend most (if not all) of their writing on literature reviews - choosing among a selection of topics, compiling a review of the most relevant literature on their selected topic (the core of which is often provided in the course work), and then expressing an opinion on that topic based on that review. In this way the student gains a much deeper and critical appreciation for the topic and its literature. As College or University students progress to Graduate school, they (hopefully!) transition to more original research and adding original literature to discussions of different topics. It may be that they saw holes in the literature of topics when they were Undergraduate students. Encourage your children to write papers that are small literature reviews. You should provide them with the topic and the reading list, and then help them through the process of editing, etc..

Back to the Future

So you are asking, when am I finally going to answer the question of how to encourage my child to love writing? After ensuring that your child is a reasonably strong reader, you can push them to write through critical discussions and arguments. Debate topics at the dinner table, encourage them to read further about those topics, and then have them write about them. They don't need to start with fully fledged research papers with citations and bibliographies. They do need to understand the need to avoid plagiarism, learn how to paraphrase, and the like. In this way we can push our kids towards the model of College or University where we hope they will ultimately end up. They need to be able to engage in intelligent, informed critical discussions that they can express through writing.

Spelling, Grammar, and all the rest

How do we teach spelling, grammar, and the like? If we interfere with the pedantic details of good writing (which are nonetheless essential) during the writing process we will shut it down and turn it into a grammatical, spelling exercise. On the other hand, if we don't have our kids correct these mistakes, they will come across as uneducated. I find that the best way to teach spelling and grammar is to have students complete their essay and then break the errors down into first order and second order priorities. The first order priorities relate to their writing structure - answering the question, providing structure, etc.. The second order priorities relate to spelling and grammar. Even when I was completing my PhD thesis, my supervisor took the time to point out some grammatical issues that I still hadn't resolved in my prior University years. I still remember these pointers and try to employ them every time I write, but in truth these pointers merely finessed my writing. What was more important was my ability to demonstrate critical thinking through my writing.

School Isn't Going to Teach your Child to Write

School is not going to give your child enough writing practice. You need to supplement. If you can write reasonably well, you can teach your child to write well. Even if you aren't confident in your own writing, you can help your child by structuring practice for them. Have your child write you 500 words every week or two on a topic of interest to you both. Take them out for ice cream and constructively criticize it - and I mean constructively.

Be extremely kind and generous in your praise. Your child will only learn a little from you each time, but they will learn a lot from the simple act of writing papers over and over. Practice, with a little guidance, is how your child will learn to write well. It's really that simple. If you don't feel confident enough in your writing skills to guide your child, just do your best and get your child to start writing regularly.

