

How to Teach Composition - Mini Workshop

by Cindy Downes

College admission officers from around the country unanimously agree that composition is one of the weakest areas for most college freshman. This includes homeschoolers as well. Why is this happening? The reasons are many but can include:

1. Composition is harder to teach. It's much easier to teach grammar skills using workbooks.
2. Many teachers became English teachers because of their love of literature, not their love of writing.
3. Composition ability is difficult to assess. Grading papers is difficult and time consuming.
4. Composition is usually taught in isolation from other subjects; however, it takes too much time away from other subjects when taught as a separate course. Therefore it is neglected.
5. Composition, when taught, is usually taught in high school as practice for college writing only - usually expository essays and how to answer in examinations.
6. Little real world writing is taught - letters, resumes, creative, editorials, business writing, journalism, etc. because of lack of time.

General Guidelines for Writing Instruction

1. Prepare a list of writing projects the student will undertake and set deadlines. These are your short-term writing goals.
2. Have a purpose for each writing assignment. For example: if they need practice in transitions, have them spend a week or two just practicing using transitions in their writing.
3. Focus on only one or two new techniques per assignment (topic sentences, vivid verbs, idea starters, descriptive paragraph...) Don't overwhelm them.
4. Have an audience for the writing assignment: portfolio, friend or relative, letter to editor, newspaper to family, publication, or contests.
5. Let them write about what they know or about what interests them.
6. Don't punish kids for grammar skill deficiencies in composition class. Make composition lesson be composition lesson, grammar lesson be grammar lesson.
7. Allow them time to write - put it into your schedule. Spend more time in writing instruction than in grammar workbooks. You can teach grammar using their writing assignments and a good handbook. Have him write frequently in a Daily journal and integrate composition practice into other subjects.

8. Read books to them that are above their grade level to help them increase their vocabulary.

Writing Instruction Timeline

1. Until the child can write comfortably in manuscript:
 - a. Have him dictate his compositions to you. Tape them or you write as he speaks. An autobiography is a great project for the early years.
 - b. Use Amazing Writing Machine or similar software to practice composition.
 - c. Make simple booklets with pictures.
 - d. Read aloud from great pieces of literature to increase vocabulary and to illustrate good writing techniques.
 - e. Use games like Squiggley's Writing Corner to make writing fun (mad libs):
<http://www.squiglyplayhouse.com/WritingCorner/StoryBuilder/index.html>
2. As writing becomes more comfortable:
 - a. Teach him to outline.
 - b. Give him a reason to write.
 - c. Use paper with lines and drawing space, writing booklets, or newspaper blanks to make writing more interesting.
3. After the child writes comfortably in both manuscript and cursive:
 - a. Teach him to type - minimum 40+ wpm (Mavis Beacom Teaches Typing)
 - b. Show him where to get ideas for writing.
 - (1) Use an idea web.
 - (2) Have him write a list of things in which he is interested (sports, horses, airplanes). Use for writing assignments.
 - (3) Have him start a clipping file: Collect magazine and newspaper clippings that interest him and use those for writing ideas.
 - (4) Visit museums, factories, missions, farms, read, expand their world.
 - (5) Have him carry a notebook in which he can jot down ideas, images he sees, characters he meets, dialogues he hears, interesting names, etc.
 - c. Teach him how to combine sentences to create more interesting sentences.

- d. Teach him to add details to his writing.
- e. Teach him to use transition words (although, after, therefore, while, finally...)
- f. Teach him to write good leads or “hooks.” Begin with a: Funny, interesting, or dramatic statement, a question, quotation, or an opinion statement.
- g. Teach him how to limit his topic.
- h. Teach him the rules of Vivid Verbs:
 - (1) Use active rather than passive verbs. Ex. The football was clutched by Dennis. Better: Dennis clutched the football.
 - (2) Avoid using the “to be” verbs (is, are, was, were, am . . .) Ex. Cindy is a fast typist. Better: Cindy types fast.
 - (3) Use verbs that show rather than tell. Ex. The truck ruined the toy car. Better: The truck flattened the toy car.
 - (4) Use a verb that is strong enough to stand alone without an adverb. Ex. Joan sat quickly on the sofa. Better: Joan plopped on the sofa.
- i. Teach him to write from different points of view (1st, 2nd or 3rd person). Read a short story, then have him rewrite it in another point of view.
- j. Teach him to write good endings.
- l. Have them write from dictation great pieces of literature.
- m. Let them use a word processor to write compositions if they are more comfortable.

How to correct your child’s writing.

- 1. First focus on content.
 - a. Have him read it out loud and rewrite parts that aren’t clear.
 - (1) Sentence structure-does it sound smooth when read aloud? If he is having trouble putting it on paper, have him tell you orally what he is trying to say. Then have him write it down.
 - (2) Are there good transitions between paragraphs?
 - b. Look at the arrangement of sentences, paragraphs. Reorder them if necessary.
 - (1) Alphabetical order
 - (2) Chronological order
 - (3) Geographical order—for example, describing an object from top to bottom or left to right.

- (4) Rank order—presenting topics according to some measure such as smallest to biggest, least expensive to most expensive, or most favorite to least favorite.
 - c. Is the main focus or idea of the piece either stated or suggested?
 - d. Help him to delete confusing or unnecessary words.
 - e. Does he use descriptive words?
 - f. Does he use good action verbs?
 - g. Is there a good title?
 - h. Encourage him to rewrite (Rewrite however many time it takes to get it right. Put it away for awhile. Then go back and edit some more.) Hawthorne wrote one chapter over 100 times!
2. After the content is the way he wants it, edit for correctness.
 - a. Spelling
 - b. Punctuation
 - c. Capitalization
 - d. Usage (Verb Agreement, Grammar) - most of this is corrected during the oral reading.
 3. Create the final product
 - a. Typeset
 - b. Illustrate
 4. Publish (a reason to write)
 - a. Family
 - b. Contests
 - c. The Writer's Market
 5. As they are able, let them edit their own work using handbooks.
 6. Grade Level Criteria (See *Any Child Can Write* by Harvey Weiner, pg. 106-110)