

# Finding Ways To Help Your Struggling Writers

BY PRISCILLA L. VAIL



There are many hurdles for young writers to clear. We know that some kids avoid writing because their lag-along hands don't keep up with their ideas, making pencil-pushing cumbersome. When I had the flu, first grade Chris made me a get-well card. On a heart-shaped paper, he drew a picture of a kid sitting at a desk writing. The bubble said, "I hate this." In another bubble, he drew himself watching TV, saying, "I love this." His message to me was, "If you're sick, you get to watch TV. Don't get well."

Kids feel ashamed when their written work is returned with red markings all over it, and we know that some kids who understand a great deal have trouble getting their ideas down on paper during tests or exams. These kids have trouble with both appearance and organization, a deadly combination. Ward was the top student in his science class, yet his exam was marked *F* with the comment, "I cannot read one word of this handwriting."

Fear of writing vanishes if we see it as a craft, as well as art. William Zinsser, in *On Writing Well*, says the craftsman improves simply by practicing. The same is true of writing. If you want to be a better writer, write daily. Then, read a good writer and write some more.

This may be the place to mention that the "writing process"—a philosophical approach to the teaching of writing which burst upon the scene about ten years ago and has attracted passionately loyal adherents—isn't the one and only way to teach writing. Junior high and

high school teachers, along with college professors, are telling us that students who have been brought up only on the writing process are hooked on "finding their own voices"—spending enormous amounts of time for very small output and having trouble shifting among different kinds of writing. For example, they have trouble with expository prose; producing clear, written summaries; or writing on demand. Students are ill-served by the exclusivity and chauvinism which unfortunately have framed the cultish aspects of a good idea.

To help young people find the "Joy of Lex," we need to banish the evil three: fear, shame, and fatigue. Then, encourage the glorious trio: humor, power, and permanence. How?

✍ To help writers climb over fear, start small. Ask them to use index cards, not big pieces of blank paper. No one is scared of an index card. Set aside time to chart and catalogue ideas. Some will never be used. That's OK. They're captured. Kids get scared when they have to think up an idea and write about it at the same time.

✍ To banish shame, throw away the red pen. Make corrections with pencil marks which the kid can erase when the error is gone. Understand the linguistic roots of errors and NEVER mock. Errors betray the language confusions we need to identify. Be grateful for them, and use the knowledge they provide.

Fourth grade Agatha, learning punctuation marks, wrote: "Use the *its-slam-*

*a-shun* point." Suffering from frequent colds, allergies, and ear infections, she never heard the sounds inside *exclamation*. Absent from school, she missed the lesson on *tion*.

Issues and errors like these need early attention and recognition. Otherwise, they continue into adulthood, making the writer look foolish.

✍ Fatigue is usually a harvest of poor or insufficient handwriting instruction. And, no, keyboards won't make handwriting obsolete. We need to restore and extend handwriting instruction from K-4 (6 when necessary). This will mean teaching teachers as well as kids; many of them, in relics of '60s fashions, think handwriting instruction inhibits creativity. The opposite is true; it undergirds creativity.

Now, let's encourage the good three: humor, power, and permanence.

✍ Sometimes, teachers and students think that to be "real," writing must be heavy, long, solemn, and didactic. The light touch in the written word is a feather-kiss.

✍ Power in writing comes from emotion, illumination, organization, knowledge to share, sense of purpose and audience, and from rewriting. Distasteful? Not at all. From shooting hoops to turning corners on two-wheelers, kids enjoy practicing what they've discovered they're already a little bit good at.

✍ Humans are always hunting around for immortality. The permanence of the written word offers a toe-hold.

Excerpted from "Words Fail Me!"  
—*How Language Works & What Happens When It Doesn't*

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