

Four Deadly Errors of Teaching Writing

Common Mistakes and Some Options for Parents

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We've all suffered it at one time or another—frustration about writing assignments. Either on the receiving end or perhaps now on the giving end, there can be a few distinctly discouraging aspects to teaching and being taught writing. The tough questions include:

- What to correct and how to give a grade?
- How much help is too much?
- Isn't the assignment clear enough?
- Why don't students find their own errors?

Because we are so much a product of our environment, our style of instruction often becomes a reflection of how we were taught, and consequently the “sins” of our teachers can easily be passed on to our own students if we are not diligent in evaluating and honing our teaching skills.



Unlike math, history, and science, writing does not consist simply of a set of facts to be learned and manipulated; it is an art and should be taught more like art. Think about piano or violin. Do we expect perfection immediately? Not at all. We expect wrong notes. We expect awkward expression. But through a process of modeling, listening, practicing, and reviewing specific, graded techniques, anyone can learn to play the violin or piano. Writing is similar. Modeling when teaching an art is not only effective, but absolutely necessary.

In music lessons, do successful teachers correct every position problem, every rhythmic error, every wrong note all at once? Certainly not. They point out one or two specific areas for improvement and assign practice goals to address those problems. As one technique improves, another gains the spotlight. Put simply, good teachers know the secret of the “one point lesson.” With this in mind, let us consider some mistakes that are so easy to make when teaching writing.

#1 Overcorrecting

This is perhaps the most common and dangerous mistake, especially for elementary and intermediate level children. Many of us might recall the experience of getting back a red-mark- plastered paper. Did we look at it and think, “Wow, look at all these great corrections. If I carefully study the teacher’s marks and really try to remember these things when I write my next paper, I’ll probably get a better grade. I can hardly wait!”? Unlikely.

More commonly, a child looks at the paper and each red mark makes him feel, “I’m wrong...I’m bad....I’m stupid...I don’t know anything...I’ll never be able to do this...” etc. Or perhaps he receives a paper with no corrections or comments but simply a “C+/B-” at the top and no explanation as to why the poor grade was given. That’s another cause for hopelessly thinking, “I’m lousy at this and have no idea how to do better.” How then to correct? Think of “editing” rather than correcting. Every good writer has an editor (and a few good editors are accomplished writers).

The purpose of editing is to prepare a piece for publication. Compositions should be marked specifically and only for the purpose of helping the child create a finished product which will be as correct and fluent as possible. Fortunately, the child will, in the process of rewriting or typing your suggested changes, semi-consciously internalize those corrections, thus learning by example and imitation, rather than by direct instruction. Every child needs an editor, and parents often need to know what that means. They must adjust their role accordingly.

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The difference between a mom and an editor is that an editor gives corrections without a lecture attached. An editor does not give grades; he helps prepare a piece for publication. He is an assistant rather than a teacher. With children, your goal is to help them produce a finished product they can be proud of, and teach by “editing,” not “correcting.”

#2 Holding Back Help

In our syllabus we overcome the problem of “I don’t know what to write about” by providing content through source texts. This is the equivalent of teaching music by assigning specific pieces to learn and practice. First, we provide content to use, teaching the “how to write” before charging into the “what” to write. But even so, children hit blocks. As we work through the syllabus of stylistic techniques, we might easily hear children complain, “I can’t think of a ‘which’ clause.” “I forgot what a ‘prepositional opener’ is.” “An ‘-ing opener’ just won’t work in this paragraph.” Does this mean we have failed? Of course not! It simply means that that technique is not yet easy and fluent.

Some teachers, meaning well, might think, “It won’t be ‘fair’ if I help too much. I shouldn’t just tell them what to write, it wouldn’t be their own work.” There’s truth to that statement, but let us not forget our purpose and goals: to model structure and style, teach through application, and develop confidence and fluency. It is OK to help a child past a block, even so far as dictating to them two or three possible “which” clauses and allowing them to choose one and use it. Did they think of it themselves? No, but so what? They chose one, they used it, and in the process of using it, they have learned. You may have to “spoon feed” some examples many times, but ultimately they will start to think of possibilities on their own. Children who read a lot will be more likely to come up with the words and constructions needed for success with the stylistic techniques, but there’s nothing “illegal” about teaching by providing examples and options. This is especially important for reluctant writers. How else will they learn?

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#3 Unclear Assignments

This is perhaps the most frustrating problem for children, whose basic nature is to want to know exactly what is expected of them. “Write a 3 page story set in the 1800’s; be sure to add plenty of descriptive words.” Ugh! How about this: “Write a paragraph about a friend; include three specific details.” Or perhaps, “Write a two-page book report on Little House on the Prairie.” These types of assignments are tough for children, especially those who don’t really like writing, because they are vague and open-ended. Most of us would prefer an assignment which is as specific as possible, perhaps like this:

Write a six paragraph story set in the 1800’s. It could be in the Old West, the South during the Civil War, or a foreign country. The first paragraph should describe the setting, the second should introduce one or more of the characters. In the third, create a problem for one of the characters, using paragraphs four and five to have them solve the problem. The last should give a little bit of epilogue and hint at a message or moral. Each paragraph should have the following stylistic techniques: ‘-ly’ word, who/which clause, dual verbs, dual adjectives, an adverbial clause, and a prepositional opener. The title should repeat key words from the last sentence. Write the first draft in pen and do not erase. Take it to your editor before typing your final copy.

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Given structural and stylistic guidelines like this, students can know more precisely what the finished product should look like, which promotes enthusiasm, gives confidence, and encourages sincere effort.

#4 Over-Expectation

How many of us might be guilty of saying (or thinking), “You had that word on your spelling test just a few weeks ago. How could you spell it wrong in this story?” or “Can’t you be a little neater?” It is, without question, difficult for anyone to catch their own mistakes, but while striving to keep a student motivated, it is important that we, as teachers, do not forget this fact: spelling, handwriting, and English composition are very different neurological functions. These activities don’t even happen in the same areas of the brain. Not that spelling and handwriting are not important—they are. But they are very different activities than English composition, which is the logical combination of words into acceptable patterns. For many young children, writing neatly requires full concentration. For many, stopping to determine the correct spelling of a tricky word can derail a whole train of thought. Even adults often find it difficult to “do everything at once” when it comes to spelling, neatness, and composition.

Separate complexity. Allow children to focus on one aspect of writing without expecting them to do everything right the first (or even second) time. Finished products should reflect excellence, but not instantly. Always look for something to compliment—a good point to reinforce—first, before pointing out a careless error or awkward expression. Success breeds success, and you, the teacher must be the coach, not the judge. With practice, repetition, age, maturity, and motive, most children will grow to produce work that is well-written, correct, and neat. But don’t expect it to happen all at once, yesterday.

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Teaching, like writing, is an art. We practice; we improve. Just as we try to guide our students to be effective—while avoiding mistakes—in writing, we must likewise endeavor to recognize and avoid the most deadly errors when teaching. Certainly none of us will become the perfect teacher, but if we continue to strive toward that goal, all will benefit: parents, teachers, and children alike.

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