



You Don't Have to Like It ...

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by Andrew Pudewa

I don't really like to write. When I tell people that, they often express surprise, assuming that since I travel the country giving seminars on how to teach writing, I must somehow enjoy doing it. Fact is, I don't. What I do like is having written something—being done with it and believing that someone else will gain from having read it. But the writing itself is hard work, and I don't much enjoy it. German author Thomas Mann observed: "A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people." Probably that's true in any discipline—music, art, or dance—and perhaps I presume to identify myself as a writer simply to excuse the difficulty I have in doing it.

Nevertheless, for me it's work.

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Students, though, are sometimes relieved to hear that I don't actually like to write, nor do I expect them to either. I tell them it's not necessary to like writing. But I do let them know they need to learn to do it decently well, because when they can, they will be better prepared to excel in whatever career they undertake, be it engineering, mothering, soldiering, or garbage collecting. In any field, those who are competent at what they do will usually be needed, but it is those who are good at the job and able to communicate the concepts involved in the work that will rise to positions of influence and leadership.



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However, as parents and mentors our problem is a paradox: It's hard for a student to get good at doing something he doesn't like to do, because to get better, he has to do it. But he doesn't want to, because he doesn't enjoy it, so he'd rather not do it. So how can we get past that?



First, we must understand the possible reasons as to why a student dislikes writing. One possible cause is neurology: a visual and/or auditory processing disorder that makes reading and/or writing difficult, or in some cases a manual/motor disability which exacerbates the challenge of eye-hand coordination. Another consideration may be a lack of appreciation for and enjoyment of language, usually the result of not having had enough good literature fed to the mind, either by ear or eye. (Note: For more of my ideas pertaining to these subjects, see my articles “[Thoughts on Dyslexia](#)” and “[One Myth and Two Truths](#)” on our website: IEW.com/articles.)

In my experience, however, the most common reason for students to dislike writing is that they’ve had repeated experiences of frustration and failure, and therefore believe that it is something at which they cannot succeed. And from whence do these frustrating past experiences come? I believe much has to do with the way writing is taught and has been taught in this country for the past several decades. Ask any random person, “What is the purpose of writing?” and they are likely to answer with some variation on this phrase: “To be able to express oneself.” Writing has become all about self-expression, emotional expression, creativity, and cathartic therapy. Unique is good. Analysis is good. Unique analysis is best. It’s all about saying something original in an original way; anything less than that isn’t real writing. And that’s a heavy burden to place upon a student—consciously or unconsciously. Even homeschool families have suffered this type of frustrating modernism in the English curricula.

So one might logically ask: How was writing taught before this obsession with creativity and originality infected modern pedagogy? If we go a little ways back, we can see that in the earlier part of the 1900s, the skill of writing centered on the expression of ideas, not of self. Recently I came across a Washington Post blog article by two University of Southern California academics, William G. Tierney and Stefani R. Relles, bemoaning the sad state of student writing at the university level, who offer four excellent suggestions for improving student writing—surely echoes of the past:

- 1) Set specific and understandable goals.
- 2) Teach students how to revise.
- 3) Teach summarizing, not analyzing.
- 4) Require more and longer writing.

Without burdening you with too many details, I can affirm that these four objectives do work, not only to improve basic composition skills, but also to improve attitude and enthusiasm about writing. The application in the homeschool should be somewhat self-evident: Make the assignments clear, and give reasons for rewriting (Checklists, models, and rubrics will provide this.); work with source materials (references, stories, articles) in the content areas (history, science, religion) for retelling and summarizing; do more writing by making it a priority and focusing on process over product. This is what I've been preaching to the homeschool world for more than a decade, and it's good to finally see a couple of Ph.D.s concur! However, if we go further back in history, even more light falls on the question of how to develop basic skills.



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Authors Jack London, Somerset Maugham, Benjamin Franklin, and others used methods of imitation, essentially rewriting previously existing works in an attempt to understand the techniques and internalize the subtleties of various writers. Recently, a random college student asked me what I would recommend she do to improve her writing ability. I responded with the suggestion that she choose several of her favorite authors and write a few pages trying to imitate each, either their descriptive capabilities, their use of dialog, or their sentence structure and word use. Somewhat surprised, she informed me that my suggestion was exactly the opposite of what her teachers say: “Never imitate anyone or else you won’t develop your own style.” But we only have to look to another discipline, say music or dance, and we realize that it is in building a repertoire and imitating the techniques of the masters that we gain a foundation of basic skills which ultimately enable originality and creativity. And going way, way back in history, we find the Progymnasmata, the ancient exercises of Quintilian and his forerunners, which also stressed the retelling of fables, concise summarizing, and the elaboration of existing ideas as the building blocks of rhetorical skill.

So, in short, I am certain that if instruction in English composition is sound—based on a more traditional approach of learning to articulate ideas (rather than focusing on self-expression, creativity, and originality), students will not only learn to write better, they will find it less overwhelming and frustrating, along with the ironic by-product of increased creativity. Honestly, students don’t really have to like the process of writing; they just have to learn to do it well. And in so doing, they may ultimately come to enjoy having completed something of quality, while preparing themselves to rise to positions of influence and leadership in the future.