

Tips for Parents: Things You Can Do To Help Your Young Writer

THE READING-WRITING CONNECTION

Do you like to read to your child? The reading-writing connection is powerful, so why not take advantage of it?

READ.

Read aloud often—and from many different kinds of texts, not *just* books. Read:

- Books
- Brochures
- How-to manuals
- Newspaper articles
- Journal articles
- Short stories
- ... And *anything else in print*. Continue to read aloud even after your children are old enough to read to themselves.
- Picture books
- Poems
- Cook books
- Pamphlets
- Letters
- Greeting cards

Take turns.

Be the reader sometimes. Other times, let your child *read aloud to you*. Reading aloud builds comprehension skills, a sense of what a sentence is, fluency, punctuation skills, sense of voice, and much more. It is VERY important for the child sometimes to be the reader. Show your child how to be an active listener, too. If you do not understand a word, ask about it. If the plot of a story takes an unexpected turn, comment on it. Let your response show.

Read what *you* love and enjoy.

That way, your love of reading will shine through. Your voice will be expressive and full of life. Your child will learn to listen for voice—and even more important, will learn that reading is a joyful thing to do.

Find a cozy spot that's just yours.

Where you read can be almost as important as what you read. In school, children usually must read sitting straight up in hard, unforgiving chairs. But most of us, given a choice, would prefer to curl up on the sofa, in a favorite chair, on the top of a bunk bed, or even on a corner of the rug banked by pillows. A friend remembers Friday nights as “reading nights” in her house. “The popcorn would be popping, and the heat would be coming from the radiator in the corner, and I’d be reclining nearby with my favorite cushiony pillow under my elbow, heading into another world—the world of the book.”

When you're out and about ...

With younger readers/writers, read road signs, billboards, package labels—any large print you encounter! Older readers can read road maps or directions, brochures or travel books, descriptions of a “promising” restaurant or tourist spot.

Try readers' theater!

For a change of pace, try some readers' theater, in which you and your child together do a dramatic reading of a play or any book that lends itself to two voices. Anything with two (or more) characters from *Winnie the Pooh* to *Macbeth* will work.

Videotape or audiotape your student reader.

It's difficult to hear your own voice when you read. Hearing themselves on tape can help students with interpretive, expressive reading.

Extend the reading.

Lucy Calkins has said that reading is a little like climbing a mountain. You don't just get to the top and turn right around to go back down. You find a way to linger. Help your young reader linger over books, too. Ask questions. Give opinions. Compare one book to another. Consider people to whom you might recommend the book. Would you read another by this author?

Ideas for young readers' read-alouds

- Grocery lists
- Road signs
- To-do lists
- Phone messages
- Labels
- Book titles
- Menu items
- Short notes

Discover the fine art of browsing.

Take your child browsing at the local bookstore or library. Pull *lots* of books from the shelves to look at, handle, and read from. Many students NEVER think to get the feel of a book in their hands before choosing it, NEVER read from a book jacket. Take time to show them how much information lies waiting on that back cover or the inside flaps—hints of what the book is about, interesting tidbits about the author. Look at

pictures, too. Encourage your child to tell you which books look most appealing and why. Read the first page or paragraph together. Does it intrigue you? Do you like this writer's voice? Is this a book you'd like to take home? Half the joy of reading lies in the anticipation.



Try role playing.

Role playing is very engaging for many students, and it's a great way to build on the reading-writing connection. If you read a book you enjoy together, try writing a diary entry from the perspective of one or two of the characters (you might each adopt a role). Or, you could write short letters in character to each other. Alternative:

One of you takes on the role of the author, while the other (in character) interviews him or her. Did the author do a good job of creating your character? Extension: Use puppets to act out the characters.

A common cry from children-as-writers is this: "I don't know what to write about." ... We need to water the desert so the writing will bloom. By watering the desert I mean providing children with the most wonderful literature available: the classics, the new, the beautiful, the revolting, the hysterical, the puzzling, the amazing, the riveting.

—Mem Fox, *Radical Reflections*

WRITE, TOO!

Provide writing materials.

Provide plenty of writing materials—paper of all kinds, colors, textures, and sizes, pens, pencils, felt tip pens, calligraphy pens, sticky notes—whatever will invite your student writer to explore writing in original, colorful ways.

Provide a print-rich environment.

As much as you can, fill your writer's world with written materials: books, magazines, newspapers, and writing you create. Young writers are ingenious borrowers, hungrily consuming every writing tidbit the world around them can offer. Older writers need a range of materials from which to draw ideas—from creative to technical. Got a reluctant reader/writer? Sometimes a personal magazine subscription on a topic of the student's choice makes reading (and writing) seem less like drudgery.

Extend your vocabulary.

If you add even a word a week to your own vocabulary, and use it in conversation, your child can learn just by talking with you. Ask your child to teach you new words, too. If you run across a word in print you do not know, take time to look it up. That way, you can model what you hope your child will do.

Write notes.

A personal note—just a few words—tucked in a lunch box or pocket can be a wonderful surprise. If you're lucky, you'll get a response. Writing doesn't always have to be BIG.

Choose some good resources together.

Got an excellent dictionary handy? (Picture dictionary for younger writers?) A thesaurus? Handbook for grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and other editorial concerns? (See the Resources list for some excellent suggestions.)



If not, shop together for books both of you like the look and feel of. Use them together, too. Let your young writer see you looking up words in the dictionary, or using a thesaurus with care ... *Let's see—slim, skinny, scrawny, svelte, slender, thin ... boy, each one is a little different, isn't it?* When you use a thesaurus, you can't just take the first word on the list. You need the word that's right.

A scavenger hunt is a good way to introduce a handbook: "Can you find the definition of a *sub-ordinate*

clause? Great! See if you can figure out whether I need a *semicolon* or *period* here ...

Let your student be the teacher as you solve writing problems together:

- Help me understand what a *noun* is.
- How do I know when to start a paragraph?
- Is *newspaper* one word or two? Where do I look if I don't know?
- Is *after* a preposition or an adverb?
- What's the difference between a clause and a phrase?
- Do periods go inside or outside quotation marks?
- What are some reasons to use capital letters?
- Name three relative pronouns.
- What's a fragment? Can you give an example?

Write together.

Let your child choose the topic. Freewrite together for five or 10 minutes, then share the results. See what different directions your writing took.

Prepare invitations.

If you have a family dinner coming up, a birthday, a holiday celebration, let your child design invitations.

Assess as a team.

Put the traits to work by assessing together. It's fun because you get to be the critics! Choose a chapter book, picture book, newspaper article, magazine article—or any piece of writing. Begin with something short. Then, evaluate it together, using your scoring guide. You don't have to assess every trait. You might look at an advertisement for word choice, or a letter for voice, a recipe or any kind of instruction manual for organization, a news report for detail. Notice the conventions in any published document. Did the writer or editor overlook any errors? How did they do on capitalizing and paragraphing? Why did they make some of the decisions they made (short or long paragraphs, lots of exclamation points or none at all)? Do you agree with their decisions on conventions? Would you have done things differently? Have some fun with your assessment. Don't get too serious—just chat.

Be a writer yourself—and get help from your child.

Be a writer. You do not have to be writing a novel or textbook to teach valuable writing strategies—a simple grocery list holds a dozen potential lessons on word choice, organization, conventions. (*How do you spell macaroni? Let's group all the camping supplies we need together.*) Let your child see that you enjoy writing, and also that it is an important skill for everyday life. Keep track of the kinds of writing you do:

- Grocery (and other shopping) lists
- To-do lists
- Letters and postcards
- Notes
- Reminder notes
- Journal or diary entries
- Evaluations
- Poems
- Stories
- Reports ...
- ... *Or any writing that's part of your life.* Talk about which kinds of writing you enjoy most or find most or least difficult, and why. Ask

your child's opinion so you can compare feelings. You can also ask your child to:

- Help plan your writing—How should we begin? What should we say? How do we end it?
- Help revise—Is it too long or wordy? Did we say enough? Does it sound friendly? Should we use this word here? Should we rewrite the ending?
- Help edit—Could you look up *transpose*? I'm not sure I spelled it right. Did I miss any periods? Did I begin this paragraph in the right spot? Do you see any mistakes in this? Thanks for checking it for me!

Share writing that you do on the job.

Do you write as part of your job? Letters? Memos? Reports? Evaluations? Advertising or promotional materials? Directions? Almost everyone in every occupation writes something. Share some of your work-related writing with your student writer and ask for his/her opinion on any aspect of it, from ideas to voice or word choice to spelling, punctuation, or use of a title. Writing is all about making good writer's decisions. Help your student writer become a good decisionmaker.

Create a photo album or scrapbook.

A photo album representing "a year in the life" or the highlights of a special event—pool party, wedding, birthday, vacation, weekend deck project, neighborhood barbecue—provides a wonderful opportunity for writing short pieces. Work with your child to create a short introduction along with labels and captions that reflect the mood and spirit of the event.

Encourage letters!

No activity is more useful for developing a sense of voice, audience, and purpose than letter writing. Encourage your child to write letters of all kinds, both friendly letters and business letters. Pen pals can be wonderful, but short notes to a friend or relative in another city can work equally well. You might also invite your child to write to:

- A favorite sports figure

- A political figure or group
- A favorite teacher or coach from the past
- A celebrity or favorite author
- A local business (for information or to praise a good policy)
- Any organization that provides information in response to inquiries

Hint: Obtain addresses from the Internet or from any resource librarian.

Write *real* letters, not just e-mail. E-mail is quickly gone, is less convenient to read aloud, and provides a poor substitute for a real, polished letter if you want later to paste it—along with your response from the president or Tom Cruise—into your scrapbook.

With the child's permission, share his or her writing.

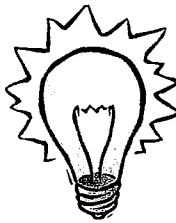
This could mean anything from helping your child publish, to simply sharing with a trusted friend—"Bill, would you like to hear the poem Rachel wrote?" This broadens the child's audience and also delivers a clear message: *I'm proud of this fine work.*

Remember—not all writing is pen to paper, or fingers on the keyboard!

Writing begins with thinking. This means you can support your child's writing skills not only through actual reading/writing activities, but also by helping him or her become a clear and organized thinker. Here are a few ideas for becoming a writer by teaching yourself to *think* like a writer. You and your young writer may think of others.

Ideas. Be a good observer. Look for the little things. The less-than-obvious. When you take a hike or field trip, tour the art museum, take in the zoo or stroll along the beach, talk about what you see. Ask your child, "What do you see that someone in a rush would probably miss?"

Debate and discuss. Older children can learn from oral debating about putting together a sound argument, presenting real evidence—not just your opinion!—and pointing out the weak-



nesses in the other person's arguments. This is a great warm-up for writing a persuasive essay.

Organization. We organize hundreds—make that thousands—of things in our lives, not just writing. This is a BIG skill, and one we can practice almost continually. Let your child help plan and structure as many things as possible, simple to complex:

- Setting the table
- Putting together an outfit to wear
- Designing an invitation or poster
- Coordinating a drawer or closet
- Reading a road map
- Arranging furniture
- Decorating for a holiday
- Planning a dinner party or any event
- Designing a garden
- Planning a trip
- Deciding which classes to take in high school



All organizational activities take planning. All require decisions about how or where to begin, what to do next, how to make the whole come together.

Voice. Be a listener. See if you can identify voices on radio or on television (without looking). Play tapes in which writers or professional readers read good literature aloud. Really tune in. Talk about differences and favorites. How would this story sound if _____ read it?



Word choice. Play “I spy” when it’s time to do the weekly vocab drill. I spy something ... *intrusive* ... *annoying* ... *pernicious* Make it fun.



You can also try:

- The synonym game: How many synonyms can you think of for *big* ... *hungry* ... *angry* ... *dangerous* ... *hot* ... *exciting* ... *difficult* ...
- The rhyming game: What rhymes with *bold* ... *leaf* ... *sigh* ... *over* ... *now* ... *funny* ... *down* ... *shower* ... *run* ...
- Game of opposites: What’s the opposite of *meticulous* ... *enraged* ... *docile* ... *frustrating* ... *engaging* ... *curious* ...

Sentence Fluency. Try it aloud. As you’re composing, revising, and editing, read sentences aloud, and try out different versions. See which plays to the ear best:



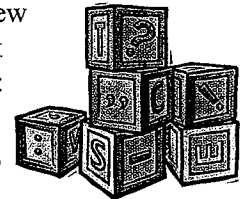
- The students were tired. They were tired from a long year of studying. They were ready for some fun.
- Ready for fun were the students following their long year of studying.
- Being tired from the long year of studying, fun was what the students were ready for.
- A long year of studying behind them, these students felt ready for fun.

Which do *you* like? Read them aloud. Practice composing orally to get the feel of fluency. (Our vote goes to Sentence 4.) Now—*you* write a set. Have your child write one, too. Pick the most fluent sentence from each set. Then, think about fluency in other contexts. Which of these things can be fluent or non-fluent? How would you know a fluent from a non-fluent example?

- Clothing
- Traffic

- A river
- A dancer
- A group of dancers
- A parade
- Shoppers in a crowded mall
- A school of fish
- Fans at a ball game
- Leaves in the wind
- Wheat
- ... Or? What other examples can you think of?

Conventions. Here are a few questions to help you think broadly about conventions:



- What are the “conventions” of a dinner party? How about a football game? A school?
- What kinds of conventions keep city traffic flowing?
- What would convention-less traffic look like? How does this relate to convention-less writing?

Presentation. What makes one book attractive while another is not? Look at advertising billboards: What makes one more readable than another? What would make an unattractive poster more appealing?

