

How Not to Teach Writing

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Homeschoolers are admirably dedicated people, and that very dedication often leads them to choose the hard-work, ineffective approaches rather than the natural, effective approaches. They feel the natural ways are too gentle. They feel they're not doing a good job unless the work is difficult almost to the point of frustration.

On a chat group, a mom wrote a wonderful line about her curriculum plan. Since I cannot do better, I give you her words.

“For reading we read, for writing we write.”

That is worth memorizing. It is worth posting on a cupboard door for a reminder of what the main core of language is.

The language arts are reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Here we focus on writing, which is closely tied to reading. To learn to write, write. And read a lot. The hard-work voice in your conscience may be asking what about grammar rules. What about vocabulary words? What about topic sentences, phrases, clauses, adverbial sentence openers? And what about spelling correctly? Following those concerns splits writing into too many parts and crowds the schedule with useless work.

Useless? Yes, I say much of it is useless, and a century of research provides evidence. Way back when I went to school I learned some of that research, so I decided to look it up now on the Internet. Thank God for Internet. I found old research buried under the new, under mountains and mountains of articles, books, and researches.

Let's look, for instance, at some spelling research. Back in 1897—that's not a misprint—in 1897, J. M. Rice published a study called “The Futility of the Spelling Grind.” It showed no relationship between spelling achievement and the amount of time devoted to spelling instruction. He measured the spelling from sentences and compositions where it really counts, not from weekly spelling lists. In 1902 Oliver Cornman published a study which showed that dropping formal spelling instruction had no effect on spelling accuracy. That was true whether he measured the words in isolation or in compositions.

Well, back in those days maybe they didn't know how to conduct research. We've come a long way since then, haven't we? In 1991 two researchers (Stephen Krashen and Howard White) reanalyzed the data using modern statistical methods and confirmed those early results.

How about teaching the rules, you may ask. Is that better than just memorizing words? In one research, teens had a full semester of intensive study of spelling rules and then were tested on their spelling accuracy. Some students said they remembered the rules and tried to use them, some remembered but did not try to use them, and some did not recall the rules. There was no difference in spelling accuracy among the

three groups. When those students tried to state the rules, they typically gave much simpler versions than the complex rules they had been taught.

Some researchers have focused on which rules actually work often enough to be worth learning. They find four or up to ten that usually work. As with the teen research, students may or may not use those rules, but at least they usually work if one does use them. Young children seldom use rules in spelling (or in phonics), but many curriculums persist in teaching them. I read a rule in a first grade curriculum and tried it on two paragraphs from “The Three Bears.” It worked only seven out of twenty-one times, or one-third. On an adult paragraph it worked about half the time, but that was only because I knew enough not to count y as a consonant in a word like *may*, and young children would not know that even if they could follow the rule otherwise. We should think of rules as a teacher level of knowledge, not a pupil level. They allow us to teach what to do in certain words at times when children need help.

So memorizing lists of words has not worked, and learning rules did not help. So the answer is to work still harder than the students in the researches, right? One educator studying the spelling problem estimated that each word learned by direct instruction consumes about twenty minutes. Estimates of new vocabulary a student learns each year vary widely because of differences in families and different ways of counting what is a word. Should read, reading, and reader be one word group or three words is one of the problems. For our purposes here, let’s take the most conservative estimate of about 1000 words per year, words children would learn anyway without a “vocabulary course.” The arithmetic works out to almost two hours each school day to directly teach the spelling of those words. Whether children would remember them is another question.

That is undoable already, and if you add direct instruction for learning the vocabulary words, you have more insanity. The saving grace is that children constantly learn new words and constantly improve their spelling without direct separate instruction, or in spite of it. Some parents call spelling a sequential subject, but it is only sequential for the teacher or the curriculum writer. The learning is not sequential at all for children. I advise teaching a word’s meaning or its spelling or phonics elements in context at the time a child meets it in his reading or writing. That is often called incidental instruction; I prefer to call it tutoring.

We could cut most of the separate “courses” out of the schedule with no loss at all. The best way to grow vocabulary and spelling skill is to read a lot. Massive reading in the early years. Conversation helps too. Older children should learn that our society values correct spelling. They can learn to recognize when a word might be wrong and then use a spell checker or a dictionary. How come you recognize the correct spelling from a list the spell checker gives you? It’s because you have seen the correct spelling in your reading. It feels right. None of us, except maybe the spelling bee champs, turn out to be perfect spellers. But your children can become good spellers by much reading and by relying on helps at the editing and rewriting stages of composition.

So drop the excess courses. Here we showed some of the reasons for viewing separate spelling courses as excess, and we mentioned a little about vocabulary, too. Space does not allow going into grammar, which definitely is excess while children are learning to write, up at least to about seventh grade. Children absorb grammar from the people around them. They already use mostly correct grammar before you ever try to teach it. We also did not have room here to go into phonics as a separate course. Teaching rules to young children is even less effective than the spelling rules were in the teen research. *Using* phonics sounds to read words and stories works better than memorizing phonics rules. Just tell children the sounds and dispense with rules.

Other excess courses appear here and there in language curriculums—things like creative writing and self expression. I believe all good writing that children do requires creativity. It does not have to be an invented fiction or whatever people mean by creative writing. Whatever they mean, writers still must make effective use of the language to communicate with the intended audience. When students are older and already write well, they might wish to read books on novel writing, screen writing, or other specialties. You can touch on particular interests of your children, but make it part of their language or, better yet, part of their history or literature, not an add-on that clutters the schedule (unless you need some clutter to fill in a high school transcript).

Many homeschoolers have left the heavy “school” approach for more natural learning and have achieved excellent results, with happier students and less frustrated parents. If you pull the segregated pieces back together, then you too can say:

“For reading we read, for writing we write.”

Biographical Information

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Dr. Ruth Beechick is a lifelong educator who now writes mostly for homeschoolers, whom she sees as bright lights in these days before Christ returns. Dr. Ruth Beechick has taught hundreds of people to read, Her own newest books are World History Made Simple: Matching History with the Bible (www.HomeschoolingBooks.com or 1-800-421-6645. and A Biblical Home Education.