

Enticing the Reluctant Writer

Vicki Caruana

Excuses echo the halls of our homes when we try to teach our children how to write. After all, you can lead a child to paper, but you can't make him write.

Children are reluctant to write for a variety of reasons. Before exploring them, take a look at your own history with writing. Often, those of us who are reluctant writers ourselves find it difficult to motivate our own children to write. If it is not something you are passionate about, you may find yourself giving up at the first sign of resistance.

More than likely, your own less-than-stellar educational experiences propagate the belief that writing is too difficult to master, so why try? Maybe you didn't have an engaging teacher, or maybe your own perfectionist nature got in the way of putting words on a page unless they were just right. Maybe you missed some spelling and grammar skills, so putting a coherent story together became a nightmare for you. Or just maybe you weren't encouraged to express yourself. Whatever reason kept you from becoming a proficient writer, don't let it become an obstacle to your children's need to gain competence. Be encouraged—you can learn right along with them!

Let's take a look at some of the obstacles that can stand in the way of confident, enthusiastic writing.

Fear of Failure

One great impediment to writing that many people struggle with is fear of failure. What is it that frightens us so about writing? Children are afraid that their words won't be good enough. They may love to read, and they may value how well an author tells a story, but they don't believe their own attempt will gain praise. Children (and adults) believe some myths about published writing. They think that what they read on the page is exactly what the author first wrote. They think that fiction is the only important kind of writing. They think that writing is not as important a form of communication as others. Debunking these myths removes real obstacles to writing.

Share with students that authors revise their stories many times before they are published. Expose them to the many different kinds of writing—magazines, books of poetry, newspapers, plays, letters, journals, websites, video game guides, how-to books, speeches, and so on. Someone had to write all those things! We write to communicate. We write to know we're not alone.

Lack of Skills

Poor handwriting, keyboarding, spelling, and grammar get in the way of feeling good about writing. If a child has poor handwriting due either to lack of instruction and practice or due to a developmental problem, he will resist writing. More and more, we

create our first draft on the computer, but if a child is not a proficient typist, he will balk at the assignment. Provide keyboarding skills either through an enrichment class or software programs that can be used at home. Spelling and grammar are just as important today as they were 40 years ago. Errors stop the reader, and the story or message gets lost. We write to be read, so it's crucial that, as writers, we not put anything in the reader's way. Even email etiquette promotes correct spelling and grammar. We judge people by their writing. If the writer doesn't take the time to ensure the writing is free from error, both his intelligence and commitment to excellence come into question.

Lack of Focus

Some of us have so many ideas that it becomes difficult to choose just one to write about at any given moment. That's why when you tell a child, "Write about whatever you want," she panics! Suddenly, she can't think of anything to write about. A blank page or computer screen paralyzes so many of us. We have to make it safe to try—to try and fail, and to try again and finally succeed. Set your child up for success by providing ways to generate and then organize her ideas.

Focus is also important within the work itself. Your child may have an idea, but maybe she talks all around it and never gets to the point. Our right-brained creative ones struggle with staying focused in their writing. They reject structure and meander through their story down every rabbit trail, and, before they know it, they have no idea where the story went—and neither does the reader. Take the time to teach children about story elements as well as the logic of essay and theme writing.

Lack of Motivation

Wanting to write and making a commitment to write go hand in hand. A child may want to write (or at least agree to write) but have trouble finishing what he starts. Use this as an opportunity to teach character traits such as perseverance, excellence, and responsibility. While they're with us, our children need to learn to finish what they start, do a quality job, and budget their time wisely, so that as adults they will exhibit those traits as employees, business owners, and family members.

Your Bag of Tricks

Even if you, yourself, struggle with the writing process, you can employ some of these strategies to enable your reluctant writer.

Inspire motivation—Take away the frustration some young writers experience by using pre-writing activities such as brainstorming ideas, getting together all their favorite "tools" (cool pencils, pens, paper, etc.), keeping a journal of new and favorite word lists, and breaking the task into bite-sized pieces by writing just a word or just a sentence or just a paragraph. Success breeds success, so if they learn to be faithful in the little things, they will grow into the bigger ones.

Encourage fluency—A fluent writer generates ideas on paper quickly and easily. It takes practice. Spend time in concentrated writing practice by grabbing onto a passing thought in your brain. If you're wishing you were playing outside, write about that. If you're thinking about how tired you are, write about that. Whatever comes into your head, stop, grab it, and write about it. Write without stopping, without worrying about spelling, grammar, punctuation, or handwriting. Write until you have nothing left to say. This helps your hand write what flows directly from your brain.

Promote interest—Children write more and are more motivated to write when the topic interests them. Instead of deciding for them, provide a collection of story starters, journal prompts, and pictures from magazines from which they can choose.

Provide focus—It's less intimidating to correct someone else's writing than to correct your own. Daily give children a sentence, paragraph, or even a story (for older children) to find fault with. Tell them to be on the hunt for spelling, grammar, punctuation, structure, and flow errors. Plan ahead by writing examples on index cards or by using a packaged program designed for editing practice. This exercise helps them to focus on revision without taking it too personally.

Reluctant writers may or may not also be reluctant readers. Encourage them to read a wide variety of books, magazines, and online content. Reading and writing go hand-in-hand. When your children begin to build confidence in their writing, provide opportunities for them to showcase their work online at sites that publish children's work.

Biographical Information

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