

Copywork: The Act of Writing

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Introducing children to the skill of writing need not be an ominous task. One must merely keep in mind that young children are also young thinkers who need exposure to the world of ideas before they can be expected to put their thoughts into complete and coherent sentences. Often, young students are required to write from what is within them, and therein lies the problem. Young children simply lack the life experience and expertise of their adult counterparts. Therefore, the task of organizing their thoughts (on paper) in a structured manner is overwhelming and too often a recipe for failure. Therefore, what many young learners need is a model for their writing, a kind of visual map to show them, literally, what organized words and sentences look like. This is easily accomplished through the method of copywork, which is merely copying a sentence, a paragraph, or a page from a selected passage of writing.

The practice of copywork has numerous benefits, the first of which is that it gives the emerging writer a safe place to start—a place where he can concentrate on the skill of handwriting, without the added layers of complexity that come with putting one's own thoughts on paper. This is an advanced skill that will come gracefully, with time and maturity. In the meantime, the emerging writer needs clear directions. Consider, for example, the following passage by Robert Louis Stevenson, which is a wonderful passage for a beginning writer to copy:

The world is so full of a
Number of things,
I'm sure we should all be
As happy as kings.

The preceding 20 words give a first or second-grade child a correct way to write, spell, and punctuate a sentence. He is not forced to invent the spelling of a word he does not know how to spell. Everything is correctly modeled. In this respect, copywork can be compared to having a recipe when one is baking. It would be inconceivable for a novice in the kitchen to try to bake chocolate chip cookies without having a recipe to follow. However, after baking dozens of batches, reliance on the original recipe is not as strong, and variations of the recipe can be attempted with confidence. And after further experience, a variety of cookies can be prepared because the basics have been mastered. The same is true with writing. The practice of copywork enables children to make a smooth transition from writing the words of others to writing words of their own.

Another advantage of copywork is the exposure it provides to beautiful and/or profound thoughts. When the printed word is given as a model for handwriting, the ideas represented by those words are also being modeled for the young mind. In this respect, copywork exercises are similar (in the advantages they provide) to reading aloud to your child. In both instances, the child's developing mind is given increasing exposure to the world of thoughts and ideas. After

all, in order to absorb ideas, one must first be exposed to them! Therefore, copywork provides the unique opportunity for great authors and other thinkers to “speak” to your child, while his own thought processes continue to mature.

Another benefit of children writing out passages from great authors and thinkers is that they are taught to pay attention to detail. In order to write out a passage accurately, the young writer must pay attention to every “jot and tittle,” so to speak, and copying letters and words exactly as they are written. In this respect, copywork is a great tool for teaching accuracy. It is also a great tool for sharpening cognitive thought, especially when the student matures enough so that he can compare his work with the original passage and find any inconsistencies, rather than relying on his parent to do the same. As you can see, copywork teaches so much more than penmanship!

Copywork also introduces students to the beautiful structure and style of the English language, an abundance of literary styles, and various models of good grammar. A fourth- or fifth-grade student will discover that some writers speak with grace and eloquence, some use words as if they were magic, and some get right to the point and speak with a simplicity that can always be appreciated by the reader. Each author’s thoughts, when selected with discernment, have something valuable to teach your young child. Indeed, copywork is the perfect vehicle for soaking up these lessons on “word choice” and the rhyme and rhythm of the English language.

On a less esoteric level, copywork passages can also serve as an alternative to the traditional book report, especially for younger students who are still struggling with correct spelling and grammar usage. Copywork books can also serve as a visual record of your children’s handwriting ability and progress, especially if the handwriting passages are dated. And with the passage of a few years’ time, most children will enjoy looking back on their handwritten pages, and they will have the added benefit of better understanding and appreciating the passages they wrote in years past. Therefore, whether you use a composition book and select your own passages for your children’s copywork or use a prepared program, a completed copywork book provides a solid record of achievement and a memento to treasure in years to come.

Another beneficial aspect of copywork is that it is easy for you as the parent to provide the oversight, which is minimal. As the parent, you can also determine how often your child writes passages, and, until your child matures, longer passages can be divided into two or three days’ worth of work. However you go about it, each year’s completed copywork provides concrete evidence of a student’s hard work. And since I cannot say enough in regard to the benefits of copywork, allow me the liberty to share one more example, from *Augustus Caesar’s World* by Genevieve Foster, and recorded by my son when he was in the fourth grade:

“This is what makes the study of history so valuable,” he was to say— “the fact that you can behold, as displayed on a monument, every kind of conduct; thence you may select for yourself and your country that which you may imitate; thence not what is shameful in the undertaking and shameful in the result, which you may avoid ...”

As the above passage illustrates, children who are engaged in copywork are exposed to a multitude of thoughts and ideas. Aside from time spent on the art of handwriting, time spent on

copywork allows time for absorption of the ideas behind the words. After this process of “hearing” the thoughts of others, your child is greatly helped in his process of learning to articulate his own thoughts, and he will be better equipped to communicate them on paper. Indeed, the practice of copywork enables a smooth transition from writing the words of others to writing words of one’s own. In the meantime, as your child matures he is using increasingly sophisticated passages for his copywork because one of the marvels of the copywork method is that it grows with your child.

Indeed, copywork is a great “launching pad” for beginning writers. After your student has practiced (and practiced and practiced) writing, using the words and thought of others, he will have had time for further cognitive development. He will now have something worthwhile to say. He will be more ready for creative writing, descriptive writing, book reports, essays, journaling and journalism, and whatever other avenues of writing he would like to pursue. He will have gained confidence in the world of words because he is no longer intimidated by words. On the contrary, he will have become familiar and well acquainted with words, and ideally, words are now his friends—and useful friends at that. More importantly, he will be ready for the act of writing, which is merely giving voice to one’s thoughts.

Remember, a child who says, “I don’t know what to write” is usually saying, “I don’t know what to think.” But please don’t misunderstand. Copywork is not something merely for “slow” students or reluctant writers. Copywork is for everyone. Accomplished writer and inventor Benjamin Franklin taught himself to write using a method of copywork—the details are in his autobiography. But the point is this: the practice of copywork was tremendously advantageous to the students of yesteryear, and those who use this same structure today will be well served. Thanks in part to this old-fashioned method of learning to write, it is possible to produce articulate writers. In fact, it is more than possible; it is highly probable (and achievable). Just allow your child’s mind to be filled with great ideas and thoughts *before* you give him his first writing assignment. Sharpen those pencils and let the writing begin!

Biographical Information

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Yvonne Mutch, a homeschool mom for over 16 years, is the editor of the copywork program Something Worthwhile, which includes Handwriting Exercises for the Beginning Student (recommended for second-fourth grade) and Handwriting Exercises for the Intermediate Student (recommended for fifth-eighth grade). Each book contains 130 pages of handwriting exercises consisting of quotes from historical figures, passages of poetry, excerpts from historical speeches, essays and letters, and other famous passages. The program can be viewed at [Latintrivium.com](#).