

My Struggling Writer

MY OWN RELUCTANT WRITER is the real face behind WriteShop. My son Ben and his friend Brian were buddies before they even started kindergarten. They were peas in a pod: fidgety, kinesthetic, active, smart little guys!

But unlike their older sisters, they didn't catch on to reading and writing.

Debbie and I each had our own homeschooling methods, products, and ways of approaching these subjects—yet we both struggled to help our boys make progress toward independence. We'd start and stop, start and stop, seeing little fruit.

I'm guessing this has happened to you, too.

The Boy Who Couldn't

Ben had no lack of words or ideas, but he had a hard time holding a pencil (or sitting still, for that matter). Rather than keep waiting until that magical day when he could write the words down by himself, I let him dictate as I wrote.

This was long before I'd ever heard of Charlotte Mason or narration. But it just made sense that if he couldn't write on his own, all his great ideas would just smolder inside his busy little brain.

I wanted those thoughts to burst into flame! So [having him dictate](#) his stories and short reports to me (with lots of prodding, prompting, and questions on my part) was key for us, as it allowed him not only to make up creative stories, but to express his knowledge and understanding of the [different subjects we were studying](#).

By the time our boys were 12, however, Debbie and I had become more desperate to see some independence in this area. Allowing them to narrate was all good and well, but they really needed to develop personal writing skills!

We had no idea what we were doing, but figuring it could only help, we committed to teach a writing class for a handful of homeschoolers our boys' ages.

At first, we drew from a variety of writing materials to teach our students, but to our dismay, every one of them still had trouble putting cohesive thoughts on paper. Clearly, something had to change!

Armed with goals and ideas, Deb and I began creating our own lessons week by week. Imagine our joy when all the children—not just our own boys—began to write with improved content and style.

Cling to Hope

Our daughters were intuitive writers, easy to guide and easy to teach. But we didn't have much faith that our reluctant 12-year-old sons would be able to write. The road was rough—and often frustrating, but diligence paid off. Today, Brian is a high-achieving sergeant in the US Army, and Ben is earning a Ph.D. in theology. How thankful we are that our exploration of new ideas—coupled with time, patience, trial and error—kept us on the path and allowed our sons to blossom and mature in their own time.

While my homeschooling days are behind me, some of you are just starting your journey. You can't even begin to imagine that one day your struggling writer will come up with an articulate, coherent thought on his own.

If you're feeling anxious, take heart. You can learn to teach your kids that writing is more than random thoughts tossed onto paper. You can help them learn to use important tools that lay a foundation for future writing—writing that will take shape and mature as their knowledge, life experiences, vocabulary, and thinking skills develop.

Your children may not become scholars . . . *and that's okay*. But good writing skills will take them far.

When you feel frustrated, remember that I walked that path too. I hope you can take encouragement from my story that a great deal can—and will—happen between now and adulthood.

Teaching a Reluctant Writer

YOUNG CHILDREN ARE OFTEN BURSTING WITH IDEAS. Most likely they can talk your ear off, but getting them to write those ideas down is another story altogether.

Where Did It Go?

The act of capturing a fleeting thought and pinning it to the paper is a challenge. We think it sounds so easy to “just write what’s in your head,” but the reality is that many children simply aren’t mature enough to put all the pieces together.

First, a thought must formulate in a child’s mind. Then, it has to travel all the way down his arm to the pencil. By the time he starts wondering how to spell this word or punctuate that sentence, the once-delightful idea has at best been reduced to three dull words, or at worst, vanished completely.

Children 10 and under often need more help with writing than we think they should. We expect them to be able to think of an idea all on their own and then write about it. But in truth, many kids

- Struggle to come up with writing topics.
- Get overwhelmed by perfectionism.
- Fear making mistakes.
- Forget what they want to say.
- Complain that their hand hurts.

Whether or not your children have special needs or learning struggles, writing can throw them into a tailspin.

Start Them Young

Too many students approach junior high strongly biased against writing—either because they were never taught how to write and now fear it, or because of negative experiences with writing as younger children.

By starting while your kids are young, they may actually look forward to writing and learn to approach it with joy. This happens when you create a safe, warm, nurturing atmosphere and offer writing activities that not only teach, but that are also infused with fun.

How Much Help Should You Give?

Whether you make suggestions or do the actual writing, it's easy to feel guilty for holding your child's hand. When parents ask me how much of the writing they should take on, I always reply: *As much as it takes for your children to feel successful.* And if you ask how much of the writing your *children* should be doing? *Only as much as they are able.* It's very simple, really. If you sense their frustration at ANY point along the way, recognize that this is their cry for help—and your signal to take over a bit more.

Depending on your children, you might:

- Provide them with writing ideas and prompts.
- Do some or all of the writing while they dictate to you.
- Let them write the words they know while you write the words they can't spell yet.
- Let them write from observation or personal experience instead of “making up” a creative story.
- Encourage them to write about topics they love or that tickle their fancy—*horses, sports, chess, Legos, gardening, etc.*

Instead of worrying that you're failing your child, enjoy knowing you're *modeling and teaching*. All the while, your little sponge is absorbing, processing, and sorting everything into his mental filing system.

The good news is this: You won't handicap your child by supplying him with writing topics; he won't become a writing failure if he lifts a story idea from a sibling; and prompting him with questions and dialog won't create over-dependence on you. Though it may take a while for him to really get it, your participation with him is an important key.

Shoot the Writing Rapids—Together

As the mom of a once-reluctant, writing-phobic son, I speak from experience.

My daughters were more “natural” writers who fairly sailed down the rapids of writing. My son, on the other hand, couldn't stay afloat in the raft! Our journey was hard, and we experienced more than our share of frustration, so I can completely relate to your struggles.

From the time we began homeschooling in kindergarten until Ben was 14 or 15, I stayed very involved with his writing, whether it meant helping him with ideas, prompting his writing with questions and dialog, or letting him dictate to me while I wrote his words down. Sometime around 10th grade, the pieces FINALLY fell into place for him, and by the time he graduated from high school, he had become a strong, independent writer.

So hang in there! Don't be afraid to hop into the writing boat with your son or daughter. Help now, as much as your child needs you, and believe that independence *will* come one day.