WriteShop®



10 Stumbling Blocks of Writing

Help Your Middle and High School Students Overcome Writing Hurdles

by Kim Kautzer

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10 Stumbling Blocks of Writing: Help Your Middle and High School Students Overcome Writing Hurdles

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Introduction

Sigh. Once again, it's "writing time" at your house.

During the past hour, your reluctant writer's paper has become riddled with scribbles and smears. And e-v-e-r-y time he erases with frustrated vigor, a tiny hole appears in the middle of that gray smudge. As the hole grows larger, his mind freezes up and closes in. Then the laments begin:

- *What do I write about?*
- *Where do I start?*
- *How long does it have to be?*
- *I'll never think of something.*
- *"I HATE WRITING!"*

There's so much frustration behind those blinked-back tears. And you know what? It's not just kids who experience it—YOU struggle too.

Why Is It So Hard to Teach Writing?

Teaching writing is one of the biggest hurdles homeschooling families face. First, parents often feel insecure, inadequate, and under-equipped. For many of you, teaching writing ranks right up there with a trip to the dentist.

Although we know the importance of passing on this skill to our students, so many excuses stand in our way!

- *How can I teach if I never really learned to write?*
- *I don't write—I'm just a math-science person.*
- *What if I don't know how to grade a paper?*
- *Writing comes easily to me—but I don't have clue how to teach my kids.*

Second, children are paralyzed by writer's block, fear, and perfectionism. Most students want to write a paper once and declare it done. They hope we'll rave over it and accept it as a finished product. The smallest hint of

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suggestion from Mom sets off howls of protest: *Why can't I leave it this way? You never like anything I write!*

Blank paper, reluctant child, and insecure parent—combine these three ingredients together and I pretty much guarantee that your hopes for teaching writing will be dashed on the rocks.

Let's face it. It's easy to keep pushing writing to the back burner with intentions of getting to it "someday." And for many, "someday" has come and gone, and now you have:

- *a high schooler who can't write;*
- *a panicked mom burdened by guilt;*
- *and the infernal blank page that taunts you both.*

10 Stumbling Blocks to Writing

We need to 1) recognize some of the most common stumbling blocks to writing that stand in the way of your child's success, and 2) determine how your writing strategy can help.

Take heart! These stumbling blocks are neither so heavy that they can't be moved, nor so tall that they can't be scaled.

Here are the ten stumbling blocks we'll be looking at:

1. Lack of confidence
2. Lack of skills and tools
3. Lack of motivation
4. Limited writing vocabulary
5. Perfectionism and self-criticism
6. Laziness
7. Procrastination
8. Worry about criticism from mom or dad
9. Wondering what's the point
10. Learning difficulties that interfere with the writing process

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More importantly, I'll offer solutions to help your student overcome them. Most of my suggestions will be aimed at older students (5th or 6th grade through high school). But even if you have younger children, you will find tips and suggestions you can apply now. By doing so, you can begin to ward off some of these problems early on, setting your children up for greater writing success in the future.

At the end of this guide is an appendix listing all ten stumbling blocks with the solutions. Even if you don't print this entire book, you may want to print those two particular pages to keep in your own planning binder for easy reference. When writing becomes frustrating, take a look at those solutions to determine your actions steps.

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Stumbling Block #1 – Lack of Confidence

Problem: *Lack of confidence due to poor writing guidelines and vague instructions or expectations.*

Solution: *Establish boundaries and give clear directions for each writing assignment.*

In his book *Dare to Discipline*, Dr. James Dobson reports the findings of an interesting study done on school children during the early days of the progressive-education movement. Apparently, an enthusiastic theorist decided to take down the chain-link fence that surrounded the school grounds. He thought the children, who clearly enjoyed exploring the enclosed yard, would feel even more freedom of movement without that visible barrier surrounding them.

But here's the curious thing: When the fence was removed, the boys and girls huddled together near the center of the play yard. Not only did they not wander away, they didn't even venture to the edge of the grounds.

This little experiment served to reinforce a simple truth: There's security for children in defined boundaries.

Establish Boundaries

What does this have to do with writing? Well, giving your student a blank page and saying, "Write about whatever you want!" is no different from plunking these kids down in the middle of an unfenced playground.

Instead, position your child for success by setting boundaries for the composition. One idea is to limit its length. This helps your struggling 12-year-old son relax a bit. *("Hey, Buddy, you only have to write five to seven sentences.")* He will be less likely to freeze up if he knows the lesson parameters.

But it also helps your wordy, rabbit-trailing 15-year-old daughter write more concisely. By limiting her to one paragraph of five to seven sentences,

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you're training her to choose her words more wisely, thus avoiding tangents.

As you can see, the same idea will work to the advantage of both kinds of writers: you're offering the writing-phobic child safe boundaries while establishing clear limits for your rambler.

Provide Topic Options

Giving your child a specific writing topic further adds to his security. Don't assume that if a child has freedom to write about anything he wants, his little pen will skip across the paper like an eager lamb. This tactic usually backfires. At best, such freedom frustrates some struggling writers and sends others into a nosedive of absolute terror!

I promise—it's much better to offer concrete topics they can choose from. Instead of saying "write about a food," suggest they use their five senses to describe a taco, cinnamon roll, pizza, or ice cream sundae. You're still giving choices but within the confines of a safe perimeter.

Give Clear Directions

Finally, provide step-by-step instructions to build confidence. It's not enough to tell kids to write; they need to learn *how* to write.

Giving open-ended or vaguely worded assignments will only contribute to lack of confidence and frustration. Instead, whether you create your own writing assignments or use a prepared curriculum like WriteShop, make sure your child knows exactly what's expected.

Example A: Poor instructions

> Describe an object. (Or, pick an object and write about it.)

Example B: Clear instructions

1. Choose an object you can hold in your hand. *Do not* pick a food, an animal, or a person.

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2. Carefully observe your object. Brainstorm about it, listing everything you can about its features. Consider appearance, color, size, shape, texture, smell, and sound.
3. Look closely for details, including imperfections and flaws.
4. Write a 5- to 7-sentence paragraph describing your object. (*Do not* explain what the object is used for, and do not tell a story about it.)

Derek was an 8th grader whose first composition for our writing class consisted of two pitiful sentences. But within weeks, with clear limits and guidelines such as these, his confidence blossomed and he became one of the strongest writers in the class. For your child as well, clarifying your instructions may be all that's needed!

Bottom line? With a few easy-to-implement solutions, you will help your student feel more sure of himself. The result? He'll perform better when he knows just what you—and the writing assignment—are asking of him.

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Stumbling Block #2 – Limited Writing Skills and Tools

Problem: *Kids don't have the writing skills and tools they need to make stories, essays, or reports fresh and interesting.*

Solution: *Introduce prewriting exercises, brainstorming worksheets, and checklists.*

Whether you're sewing, gardening, working with wood, or fixing an engine, you can't do the job properly without certain skills and tools. The same can be said for writing—and I'm not just talking about paper, pens, and a laptop. Let's look at some practical principles you can apply to begin equipping your children for success!

Pre-writing Activities

One of the easiest ways to build writing skills is to have some fun! Pre-writing exercises and writing games act as enjoyable warm-ups to get creative juices flowing, build vocabulary, and strengthen sentence development. Games you make up, like sentence-building or concrete writing games, make perfect pre-writing exercises.

And don't discount the value of purchased word games. *Scattergories* and *Apples to Apples* come to mind as two great writing warm-up games our family loves to play. Along with old friends like *Scrabble* and *Boggle*, they make ideal family gifts. Your kids will have no idea they're learning!

Brainstorming Worksheets

Before your student writes the first word of her composition, she'll improve her chances for success by brainstorming. Like prewriting, brainstorming is a skill that stimulates thinking in general. However, it also acts as a springboard for writing about a particular subject. When a student brainstorms:

- It gets her ideas flowing so she has something to say.
- It helps her overcome writer's block.

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- It prepares her for writing as she develops a plan and gains direction.
- It helps her organize her thoughts.

To further promote thinking skills, you'll want to teach a *variety* of brainstorming techniques. Whatever the topic, suggest a brainstorming method—mind map, list, or outline, for instance—that's best for the kind of composition your student is writing. For example:

- She might brainstorm for a how-to composition by listing the steps of the process.
- If she's writing a descriptive paragraph, she should carefully study the subject for interesting details and record her observations.
- For a narrative, she'll want to sequence the events.
- A Venn diagram is especially useful for compare/contrast essay.

There are many ways to brainstorm, but worksheets and graphic organizers are tools that often smooth the way for reluctant writers. If you are using a program like WriteShop I or II, you'll find brainstorming worksheets already prepared for each writing assignment (see an example here). Alternatively, a quick Google search will yield a variety of brainstorming tools available on the web.

But brainstorming isn't just for your junior high or high schooler! You can begin teaching this skill in kindergarten, either on your own or with a helpful curriculum like WriteShop Primary. Starting your children when they're young can help prevent the debilitating case of writer's block that often plagues older students.

Checklists

A good checklist serves as a guide to help your student identify her own errors in content, style, and mechanics so she can improve and enliven her writing. For instance, if the checklist reminds her to use synonyms instead

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of repeating main words, she'll be forced to find more interesting words. This simple tool can help her hone a valuable skill she'll use all her life.

Other Skills and Tools

In addition to checklists and brainstorming sheets, there are other tools that help breathe new life into writing. For example, skill-building exercises can give a student instruction and practice in new writing skills like choosing titles, writing topic sentences, citing sources, or using sentence variations.

I'm sure grammar is part of your language arts curriculum, but how it can revive writing may be a complete mystery to you. I'd like to suggest that when you require your student to use newly learned grammar concepts in her compositions, the grammar actually makes more sense. So rather than teach grammar in a vacuum, teach it as it applies to writing. That's where the rubber meets the road!

Writing isn't an exact science, but you can certainly apply proven principles to promote stronger writers in your home. It's my prayer that you'll begin to notice a difference in both attitude and output as you put some of these tips into practice.

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Stumbling Block #3 – Lack of Motivation

Problem: *No motivation to write*

Solution: *Give kids a wide variety of writing experiences and allow them flexibility to choose topics.*

Offer a Varied Writing Diet

Uninteresting or irrelevant topics often produce unmotivated students. One solution? Give your child greater options. Don't limit him to one kind of writing, like essays or factual reports. Instead, vary his writing diet so he feels more motivated to write!

- Offer experiences with descriptive, informative, and narrative writing. Let him describe people, places, foods, and objects.
- To dabble in expository writing, encourage him to explain a process, write short reports or biographies, or write news articles.
- Teach him to write narratives from varying points of view or in a different voice or tense.

Allow Freedom to Choose Topics

Try give your less-than-motivated student a bit more flexibility with topic choices. Nothing stifles creativity like saying, "You MUST write about THIS."

I'm not saying your kids should run the show. After all, you're still the teacher. But if you're teaching a particular *kind* of writing, such as describing a place, you can give freedom of choice—anything from a baseball stadium to a tea room, from a mountain wilderness to a busy street corner—while remaining within the lesson's framework.

It's the best of both worlds when you establish some parameters but offer freedom too. When children have more ownership of the subject matter, you'll find they're much more likely to invest themselves in the writing.

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Tie Writing to Other Subjects

When there's no motivation to write, you might also try incorporating writing across the curriculum whenever possible. Instead of teaching writing as a separate subject, writing across the curriculum lets you mesh writing instruction with your study of history, literature, art, music … the opportunities are endless.

Write with Delight

Consider delight-directed learning, which allows students to explore a favorite topic—hobby, sport, historical period, *whatever their passion*—and write about it in many ways:

- Using vivid description
- Explaining a process ("how-to" composition)
- Writing stories and narratives
- Writing essays and reports
- Developing news articles

The beauty of delight-directed learning? Each writing project focuses on a different aspect of your child's topic of interest, whether it's Legos, gardening, horses, or antique guns.

You may grow tired of reading football-related essays, stories, and reports about topics such as choosing a helmet, the history of football, Tim Tebow, and "My First Touchdown," but if it means your student is writing … well, rejoice!

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Stumbling Block #4 – Limited Writing Vocabulary

Problem: *Limited writing vocabulary that inhibits ideas and contributes to weak stories, essays, and reports.*

Solution: *Teach your student to develop and hone vocabulary by using a thesaurus and word banks.*

A student who has a growing supply of words at her disposal learns to express herself just as she intends—using the right word at the right time. Not only that, she allows the reader to grasp subtle shades of description and meaning.

On the other hand, a limited vocabulary can cripple a child's attempts to produce an interesting piece of writing. If he can't express himself concretely, his stories or essays end up riddled with oft-repeated words and ho-hum vocabulary. Based on feedback I've received from many, many parents, this might very well be your child.

Here's some welcome news—this problem has a relatively simple solution. Let's take a look at some practical ways to boost your student's writing vocabulary.

Start with a Good Thesaurus

A thesaurus helps your student find fresh new words to replace tired or overused ones. It's a necessary tool for every writer and should not be considered an option.

My all-time favorite thesaurus—and the one my students used when I taught WriteShop classes—is *The Synonym Finder*. Comprehensive yet easy to use, *The Synonym Finder* puts every other thesaurus to shame. As one mom put it:

> *"It's HUGE. We got rid of all the other ones we had in the house (we got tired of not finding the words we were looking for)! A GREAT resource…. We highly recommend it." –Patty K.*

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It’s so much fun to watch your kids begin to use new words. There’s nothing like seeing exciting words like *dazzling, jubilant,* and *thunderous* begin to replace vague ones like *bright, happy,* and *loud*. And your children will find that as their word choices expand, writing becomes more fun!

Choose Shorter Words

Teaching kids to use a thesaurus has its drawbacks, especially when they get carried away with the joy of discovering new words. In these enthusiastic moments, sometimes they end up with awkward words that weigh down their writing.

There will always be exceptions, but as a rule, long words tend to be more formal—even stuffy. Short words, on the other hand, tend are often more forceful and direct. And as language gets more direct, clarity improves.

Short, familiar words—typically words with fewer syllables—are more easily understood than their longer counterparts:

- grit vs. indomitability
- biased vs. opinionated
- sharp vs. perceptive
- forlorn vs. dispirited
- clutter vs. disarrangement

This doesn’t mean students should never use longer words. On the contrary, it’s great to see their vocabulary blossom. But eagerness to discover new words can result in sentences strung together by clumsy vocabulary.

Bottom line: Teach, model, and encourage your children to use more challenging words, but wisely!

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Use Word Banks

Another excellent source of new vocabulary, word banks provide specific lists of words by category or topic, such as holidays or seasons. When a student is tempted to reuse a familiar word because he can't think of any others, a word list can remind him of alternative words he already knows but can't quite reel in from the edges of his mind. It can also provide a wealth of words that will spark ideas in a reluctant writer's mind. That's why we've include word lists in several WriteShop student books—lists such as textures, colors, and emotions.

So … now that you have some ideas for bolstering vocabulary, get yourself a *Synonym Finder*, gather a few word banks, and start having fun with words!

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Visit writeshop.com for more information about choosing a homeschool writing curriculum.



WriteShop Primary

Grades K – 3



WriteShop Junior

Grades 3-6



WriteShop I & II

Junior High & High School

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Stumbling Block #5 – Perfectionism

Problem: *Self-criticism, perfectionism and writer's block go hand in hand.*

Solution: *Encourage your child to let go of precision by writing an unpolished rough draft that can be refined later.*

The Curse of Writer's Block

Writer's block. The phrase itself is enough to banish every creative thought from your child's head. When he's in a stare-down with a blank page—and the page is winning—it's easy to believe he's the only one who ever wrestles with getting a thought on paper.

It should comfort him to know that everyone suffers from writer's block at some point. Even famed novelist Ernest Hemingway admitted the most frightening thing he'd ever encountered was a blank sheet of paper!

Though many stumbling blocks litter the road to writing success, *perfectionism*—personal pressure to "get it right the first time"—is the mother of them all, and the key contributor to writer's block.

Face it. Most children—yours included—loathe the writing process. They want to write a paper once at best, and they want you to love it. There's no room in their world for the nuisance of proofreading, editing, or revising. For many of these kids, the first draft has to be perfect in their eyes.

Of course, the irony is that they're imperfect individuals who believe whatever they put on paper will never be good enough—so they don't want to write at all. "People have writer's block not because they can't write, but because they despair of writing eloquently," says author Anna Quindlen.

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Writing Tips for the Perfectionist

1. Write, Write, Write

As counterintuitive as it sounds, the more you write … well, the more you write! It's very much like priming a pump: it takes water to produce water.

So how can you encourage your child to flex his writing muscles? One way is through a simple exercise called *freewriting*. Author, homeschooler, and writing teacher Dianne Dachyshyn uses free writing to ease the grip of writer's block:

> *"The first time you ask children to do this, they will stare incredulously and grumble. They will be hard pressed to meet the time requirement of three minutes. However, after a regular discipline of free writing, they will begin to enjoy this time and it is amazing what they can produce. I often have to force them to stop at the end of ten minutes."*

Check out The Writing Well for more ways to try freewriting.

2. "Don't get it right, just get it written." –James Thurber

Believe it or not, one of the best solutions for a perfectionist is writing a rough draft. After all, writing is a debugging process. First, your child writes something sloppy. This is the *practice draft*—the imperfect, flawed rough draft. Later, he goes back and fine tunes it. That's why I love to call the rough draft a "sloppy copy." Starting sloppy deals a blow to the blank page as the student puts forth ideas and gets into the writing flow. As author and poet Margaret Atwood so aptly put it: "If I waited for perfection, I would never write a word."

3. Learn to Let Go

Enjoying the process—*any* process—is one of the toughest hurdles for a perfectionist. It's not easy, but it *is* achievable—bit by bit—as he learns to let go of the things that weigh him down.

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Let go of precision. Creativity is a messy ordeal. Why do kids think it's fine to make a mess when painting or working with wood or clay, but not when writing?

The creative process isn't always neat, tidy, and measured, and it's certainly not perfect. Assure your child it's okay if his thoughts spill out in a bit of a jumble, and it's to be expected that he or his writing teacher will add marks to the paper during editing. Cleanup begins during the revising process.

Let go of pressure. Writing can be fixed. James Michener once said, "I'm not a very good writer, but I'm an excellent rewriter." Even if you're a famous author, early drafts just won't measure up. This should come as welcome news to your young perfectionist!

As much as he wants to crumple up his efforts and keep starting over, encourage him to just get it written. Later, like every other author, he can work on revising until he's satisfied. After all, writing is a process, not a one-time event.

Let go of perfection and finish the draft. Though it's tempting for a student to try to correct everything as he goes, have him finish his rough draft without wrestling with each word, phrase, and sentence. That's what revising is for!

And don't forget to show your enthusiasm and approval when he finishes his assignment. Success breeds more success, and when your child feels successful, he'll be much less reluctant next time.

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Stumbling Block #6 – Laziness

Problem: *The lazy child is unwilling to spend time planning, writing, and revising.*

Solution: *Offer structure, rewards, more consistent supervision, and opportunities for immediate success.*

We've seen how perfectionism can hold students back from doing their best by seizing them with fear. But while some kids truly are perfectionists, others are just plain lazy. More than any of the previous hurdles, laziness tends to be a *character issue*, making it a little more challenging to deal with.

If your child is lazy about writing, chances are he's lazy in other areas too. Laziness is more global, affecting multiple facets of home and school life. It robs him of a sense of accomplishment, feelings of self-worth, and motivation to improve himself. How can he learn anything or pick up a new skill or develop a talent if he's too lazy to get up and do something?

How Can You Help Your Lazy Child?

A lazy child often fears failure. By not completing assignments, he avoids those feelings of inadequacy: *If I don't do my work at all, there's no way Mom can criticize my writing.*

He may also have learned that if he doesn't do an assignment, you'll eventually forget about it or simply let it slide. This proves to him that laziness works—and, unfortunately, he wins. *So what can you do to help a lazy student?*

Consistently Address Your Child's Laziness

1. Determine whether it's laziness or procrastination.

The procrastinator will—eventually—get the assignment done, but the lazy student may never do the task.

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2. Supervise your child.

As inconvenient as this may be, direct supervision is really the main way to deal with this behavior. So first and foremost, make your lazy student work! This may mean that you need to sit with him until he finishes each task, but stick it out and don't give up on him!

3. Learn what motivates or helps your lazy child. For instance:

- Does he thrive on recognition? Then don't save all your praise for a final draft that may or may not materialize. Instead, make sure you're giving kudos for small steps of progress along the way.
- Does he doubt himself? A lazy student may not believe he has any strengths, writing included! So encourage a sport or hobby where he shows interest and aptitude (baking, drawing, tennis, etc.).

Understand What Profits the Lazy Child

1. Choices

The unmotivated student benefits from having choices, such as what topic to write about or whether to do his writing assignment at his desk or the kitchen table.

2. A predictable plan

This child needs to know exactly what to do each day and when assignments are due. He'll also gain from having smaller, short-term responsibilities in which immediate success can be readily achieved.

3. Structure

To guarantee that your slothful student actually does the work, you must make sure the steps of the writing process are built into the program so there's no escaping the responsibility. A program like WriteShop ensures that the student must, for example, brainstorm before writing, and must edit and revise before receiving a grade.

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4. Time limits

Open-ended deadlines are not a lazy student's privilege. Give and stick to time limits. Expect him to complete a certain amount of work in a set amount of time.

5. Meeting lesson expectations.

Make sure your student understands what is required of him. He needs measurable targets, not fuzzy instructions. Specific, detailed directions are invaluable to the lazy child.

6. A certain amount of responsibility.

Your student must learn to be responsible for completing assignments, following directions, and revising his work. Your job is to provide supervision, encouragement, structure, and deadlines in order to help him learn diligence.

7. Using a writing checklist.

Proofreading is an important lifelong skill. Self-editing helps any student take responsibility for his progress as he learns (and takes the time) to look for his own errors. Ideally, the lazy student needs some sort of checklist as a guide to help him identify errors in content, style, and mechanics.

- A checklist (such as the comprehensive checklists found in WriteShop I) reminds him of every element that needs his attention. As he compares his rough draft to the checklist, he can make corrections and improvements.
- A lazy student's tendency is to check the boxes willy-nilly with eyes glazed over. But the attentive parent will recognize this character flaw in her child and work *through* the writing assignment with him to help develop qualities of diligence, discipline, and initiative.

  Eventually, through parental perseverance, your student will learn that writing is a process—and editing and revising are as much a part of that process as the actual writing.

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8. Rewards for accomplishments.

Depending on your child's age, consider using a progress chart, marble jar, or other reward system where he can earn rewards (such as going out for ice cream) or free time privileges (such as minutes to play video games or watch TV).

Not sure if laziness is the issue with your child's writing? Laziness has a cousin in procrastination, which is Stumbling Block #7. The problems—and solutions—are similar. The tips in the next chapter will help both the lazy child and the procrastinator finish those writing assignments.

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Stumbling Block #7 – Procrastination

Problem: *The procrastinator waits till the last minute to write her paper.*

Solution: *Break up assignments over time and provide accountability for your student.*

The Pressure of Procrastination

> *If it weren't for the last minute, I wouldn't get anything done. ~Author Unknown*

When we feel overwhelmed, we tend to put off distasteful tasks—or those that seem big and scary—such as cleaning the garage or preparing for a big party. Claiming we work best under pressure, we shop, bake, clean, and decorate in a last-minute frenzy. As time rushes forward and the deadline looms, we sweep piles of laundry and schoolwork into drawers and closets, abandon the balloons and streamers, and purchase a hastily chosen gift card because we never got around to buying a present.

"Procrastinators generally don't do well under pressure," says Joseph Ferrari, associate professor of psychology at Chicago's DePaul University. The idea that time pressure improves performance is a myth. In truth, procrastination can result in:

- *Health and sleep problems.*
- *Anxiety and panic as tasks pile up.*
- *Poor performance and inefficiency.*
- *Guilt.*

As William James aptly put it, "Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task."

5 Steps Toward Overcoming Procrastination

> *The best way to get something done is to begin. ~Author Unknown*

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Putting off a writing assignment till the last minute can lead to a rushed and sloppy paper hastily written just before it's due. It may also leave your child feeling too pressured or anxious to do a good job. As with the lazy student, the procrastinator needs a strategy. Try these suggestions to help your child make wiser use of her time.

1. Promote a "Do It First" Attitude

Tackling unpleasant or disagreeable tasks earlier in the day—when your student is fresh and alert—often means greater progress in shorter time.

2. Establish a Deadline for the Writing Project

When you don't give a cut-off date, you imply that your child can put the task off indefinitely. Set a date and stick to it.

3. Divide the Assignment into Smaller Chunks

While a deadline is important, it doesn't ensure that your student will pace herself. So in addition to assigning a distant due date for the whole composition or report, give more **frequent due dates** for parts of the project.

- *For a short composition, assign brainstorming, rough draft, self-editing, second draft, parent editing, and a final draft.*
- *Anxiety For a report or term paper, you'll also want to see topic ideas, note cards, outlines, etc.*

The writing process, by its very nature, *is* a series of steps. However, the procrastinator is prone to completely skip steps (or else cram several steps into one last-ditch writing session). Assignments spread over several days or weeks—with mini due dates scheduled along the way—help train her to spread out her work and not save it all till the last minute. A schedule or plan that outlines each step makes the best defense against procrastination.

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4. Make Sure to Follow Up

Students need to allow drafts to rest between writing sessions. But since they tend to wait till the last minute, they typically leave themselves no time for revising or refining. Make sure to hold your child accountable along the way with checklists and deadlines, and check her work regularly to keep her on task.

As the parent and teacher, you're responsible to ensure that your student is doing the work and sticking to the deadlines. We homeschoolers can get lax about this. If you say "I'll check over your work later," but never seem to get around to it, you continue to perpetuate the problem of procrastination. By not following up or asking to see completed assignments, you unfortunately model the very behavior you're trying to correct.

5. Set Up Task-appropriate Rewards

Come up with ways to reward steps of progress. Completing brainstorming on time or writing the rough draft may earn a student some phone or TV time. Finishing a task ahead of the due date could merit even more time to spend with her friends, read for pleasure, or work on her hobbies.

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Stumbling Block #8 – Parental Criticism

Problem: *Students feel criticized when parents evaluate their writing.*

Solution: *Use editing and grading tools that encourage objectivity and consistency.*

When it comes to chores, character training, and schoolwork, you can't always be the nice guy, the friend. You have to be the parent, which means it falls to you to judge and evaluate your kids' work. But if you don't evaluate with wisdom and purpose, you can unwittingly set them up for Stumbling Block #8.

Worry about criticism from a parent is a huge issue for children. They don't want disapproval; yet if their paper isn't perfect, they fear your judgment. Since kids often see their writing as an extension of themselves, they feel personally affronted when they see marks on their formerly unspoiled pages. Their feelings can be summed up like this:

> *If you criticize my writing, you criticize me.*

In spite of your child's hypersensitivities, you still have to evaluate, edit, and grade. So what's the solution?

Make a Photocopy

A simple step in the right direction is photocopying the story or essay and marking up the copy—especially with younger or thin-skinned children. Preserving the original, especially if it was laboriously written by hand, can go a long way toward easing a sensitive child's angst.

Be Objective and Consistent

Nothing makes the editing and grading chore easier and more pleasant than objective tools that equip you for the task. An equipped parent is a confident parent! Students can sense your confidence. They know you'll be consistent, and they won't worry that you'll be capricious or unpredictable

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with your remarks and suggestions. This kind of objectivity and consistency builds a lot of trust.

It's as simple as using a good editing checklist that pinpoints particular things you can watch for in each paper. Now your kids can see that your comments are not based on whim or mood, but on specific lesson expectations they accomplished—or failed to meet.

As you review a writing project, this impartial checklist will allow you to comment on the work in a way that helps students feel less criticized. Ultimately, when editing and grading become consistent and purposeful rather than arbitrary or illogical, you'll see a big change in their attitude—and yours!

Look for Ways to Suggest Improvement

It doesn't take much to improve a paper's style. Believe it or not, just a few simple tweaks in wording can add enough flourish and pizzazz to elevate a paper's status from mediocre to downright decent! These ideas aren't a cure-all, but they go a long way toward raising the bar. Offer some of these specific editing tips to your budding author:

1. Replace Dull Words

Replace overused, boring, or repeated words with synonyms. I'm not saying every word needs to sound like it spilled from the pen of Tolkien. But if there's an abundance of words like *good, nice, funny, weird, thing, stuff,* and *went*, then a few well-chosen replacements are definitely in order. A strong descriptive word like *enchanting* will run circles around *very pretty.* A good thesaurus can become your child's best friend!

2. Add Sentence Variety

Properly used, sentence variations bring greater depth and maturity to the writing. Beginning a sentence with a participle, prepositional phrase, or subordinating conjunction, for example, also improves rhythm and cadence. Add sparkle with a simile, or change things up a bit with paired adjectives.

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3. Choose vivid, active verbs.

Strong verbs actively engage the reader and spice up the writing. So instead of saying, “The waves came into shore,” try: “The waves crashed onto the shore,” “The waves tossed and tumbled towards shore,” or “The waves rolled into the shore.”

4. Use a short sentence now and then.

It breaks up wordy text. Honest.

Give Plenty of Praise

Dish out generous servings of praise and positive comments along with your helpful suggestions. Show your children you notice their efforts; then make gentle suggestions that encourage improved writing without bruising sensitive spirits. And when you give a final grade, laud her with sincere praise. Show that you notice things she did well and correctly. Remember: if you use an objective grading rubric, you’ll know what these things are!

Clearly, you’ll need to address more than just elements of style when you edit your students’ papers. But trust me. These easy fixes will produce noticeable and positive changes in their writing. So next time your child hands in a composition, take in the big picture, use an objective checklist, and suggest small, manageable improvements for starters. Like anything else, editing is a skill to nurture and develop, and with patience and practice, you’ll get better with each try.

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Stumbling Block #9 – What's the Point?

Problem: (1) *Your student can't see a purpose for the assignment itself, or* (2) *she can't understand why she has to go through all the steps of the writing process.*

Solution: (1) *Make writing assignments relevant, and* (2) *help your student see the value of refining her work.*

Make Writing Assignments Relevant

Though it's nice to give children choices, the kind of writing (such as a short report, book summary, or persuasive essay)—and even the specific topic—must be determined for them from time to time. They have to write on a subject of our choosing, and there's just no way around it.

Still, for the most part, students are more willing to write if the assignment feels purposeful. Writing for writing's sake—to describe a sunset, for example—may not motivate them at all. But writing as it applies to their Civil War studies or a lesson on botany will make more sense to them—and may even spark enthusiasm—especially if it's a subject they love.

So whenever possible, look for ways to tailor the topic to your students' interests and passions. After all, the more relevant the writing assignment, the more likely they'll cooperate.

Writing across the curriculum is one way to accomplish this. You retain control over the general subject matter while offering your child more specific topic choices. Some of these ideas may help get you started:

- Writing historical diary entries based on real journals
- Can projects take the place of writing?
- Journaling across the curriculum

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Demonstrate the Value of the Writing Process

Getting kids to write can be challenging enough, but getting them to embrace the whole writing *process* is another thing altogether. Each step of the writing process is vital, from brainstorming to final draft, but students often think of these “extra steps” as time wasters.

Revising and rewriting, for instance, can be downright painful—for both of you! Most kids hate this part of the writing process. They like what they wrote; therefore, they’re highly resistant to making any changes.

Regardless of how loudly, tearfully, or convincingly they protest, this is a necessary part of the writing process, and something all writers—including your children—have to do.

Other Skills Take Many Steps

Illustrate how other skills require many steps too, and how these steps are quite similar to the prewriting, brainstorming, drafting, and revising that comprise the writing process.

For instance, playing a musical instrument, a sport, or a video game requires investment of time and a working out of many steps. After all, how do you get to a new skill level except by practice? This makes perfect sense to your teen.

She can also grasp that in order to create a new recipe, a chef has to prepare a dish several times so he can figure out how to improve it. Is it too bland? Too dry? Could it use a topping? Is the texture pleasing to the palate? How would it taste with less salt? More vanilla?

The chef tastes each batch, adds or removes seasonings, and adjusts ingredient quantities. When he’s satisfied, he prepares the dish for others and asks for feedback. Then it’s back to the test kitchen once again!

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No Author Publishes a First Draft

A chef would never add an untested dish to his restaurant's menu until he's sure it's the best it can be. Refining and perfecting his recipe is a process, and it takes time and patience.

Would your child dream of playing a brand-new or unfamiliar sonatina at her piano recital? Of course not! It's the piece she's practiced and refined that she feels more comfortable presenting.

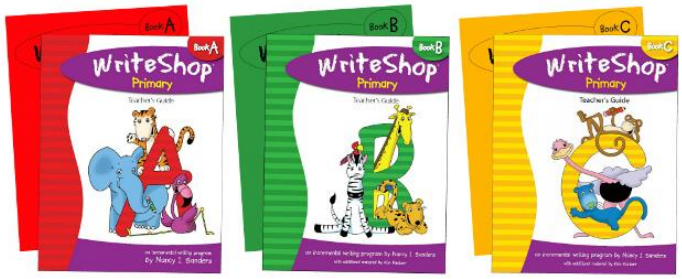
Similarly, no author ever publishes his first draft. His book or article goes through repeated self-editing—and numerous revisions—before he feels ready to submit it to his editor, who in turn adds his own suggestions for improvement. Your child wouldn't enjoy her favorite novels nearly as much had a wise editor not repeatedly put the author through the steps of the editing process.

Remind your resistant writer that she goes through the writing process with a goal in mind: *the final draft*. After all, it's not the rough draft that becomes her published writing project; it's the polished and revised version that she'll want to share with others.

Once she's gone through the revising process, ask her to compare her first draft with the final version. When she can see the progress she's made from that rough beginning to her very best attempt—the final draft, the purpose for the steps in the writing process becomes clearer. Hopefully this means less whining as she learns to approach the steps of the writing process with an improved attitude!

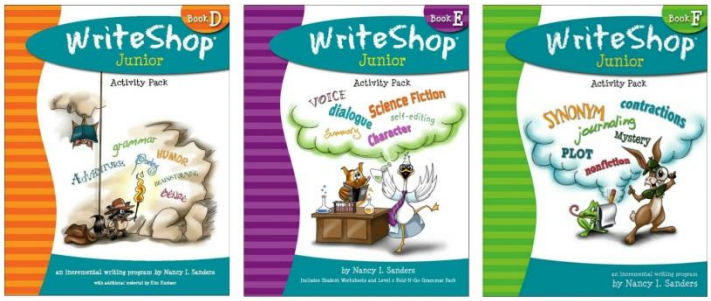
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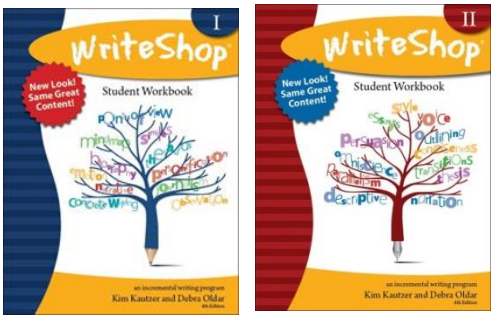
WriteShop Primary

Grades K – 3



WriteShop Junior

Grades 3-6



WriteShop I & II

Junior High & High School

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Stumbling Block #10 – Learning Challenges

Problem: *Learning challenges and special needs create many stumbling blocks to writing.*

Solution: *Short writing projects, frequent practice, and bite-size assignments are just some of the ways to make the writing process manageable.*

Does Your Child Learn with Difficulty?

Has your child been diagnosed with ADHD, dyslexia, dysgraphia, or Asperger's? Does he have an auditory or visual processing disorder? Depending on the severity, it's likely that his symptoms interfere with schooling to some degree.

Many such children live in a world littered with stumbling blocks that make learning a struggle. While these can include physical limitations like arm and shoulder tension or vision problems, a learning challenge will ultimately result in difficulty performing mental tasks like math problems or writing.

Writing issues can include:

- Awkward or tight pencil grip
- Illegible handwriting
- Poor word and line spacing
- Poor written expression
- Problems with details (paying too little attention or obsessing too much)
- Inattention and carelessness
- Disorganization
- Impulsiveness and difficulty planning
- Poor self-monitoring skills

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Helping a Student with Learning Challenges

How do you come up with a plan to help your special needs student? First, recognize that as a parent, you are your child's first and best teacher. You know him better than anyone, and you care more deeply about his needs. There is much you can do!

I'm certainly not an expert in this area, but I *can* offer you some helpful suggestions. For starters:

- Establish a distraction-free workspace for your child to do schoolwork: quiet, well lit, uncluttered.
- Set a regular time to study with your child, and work closely with him.
- Help him organize study materials before beginning.

As for writing, there are many things you can do to help a child who learns with difficulty. Consider using these ideas:

Graphic Organizers

Students do better when they can use graphic organizers such as mind-maps (clustering), charts, lists, or diagrams to help them outline and plan their work.

Self-Editing Checklists

It's important for the struggling learner to be able to mark his progress. Provide a writing checklist for every assignment to walk him through self-editing step by step.

A checklist (such as the ones introduced in WriteShop Junior, or the comprehensive checklists found in WriteShop I) reminds him of every element that needs his attention. As he compares his rough draft to the checklist, he can make corrections and improvements.

A visually overwhelmed student can use a plain sheet of paper to help him track each line of the checklist.

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Colored Pencils

Have your child use colored pencils to circle or underline potential corrections. Each color can be used for a different strategy: *capitalization, spelling, punctuation, repeated words, dull or vague words, etc.* The colors provide students with a focus for editing and revising as they revisit their work for each task.

Frequent Repetition and Practice

Make sure writing lessons build on previously learned skills. Good checklists help students apply these skills regularly.

Short, Specific Assignments

Writing projects that are short, contained, and relevant are more effective than vague, open-ended, “write-whatever-you-want” assignments. Single-paragraph compositions are excellent for students who have trouble staying focused. Whether they’re overwhelmed by longer assignments, or they’re prone to ramble, short assignments help them stay on task.

Just as important, make sure your writing program includes topic ideas and clear directions. Specific requirements for each lesson, from brainstorming to writing, ensure your student always knows what he needs to do.

Tasks Broken into Bite-size Chunks

A child doesn’t have to learn with difficulty to benefit from working on a writing project in small increments. Breaking the writing process into manageable steps helps all students, including those who are disorganized, lazy, easily overwhelmed, or prone to procrastination. Spreading out assignments over time allows for paragraphs to rest between drafts and eases anxiety and stress.

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Appeal to Different Learning Styles

A multisensory approach to writing helps many students who learn with difficulty.

- *Visual:* Use graphic organizers and checklists, calendar or schedule, and written instructions.
- *Auditory:* Play word games, give verbal instructions, ask questions to prompt writing.
- *Kinesthetic:* Describe textured objects the child can pick up and touch. When describing foods, touching and tasting the real thing makes it easier to paint a vivid word picture. And when writing about a place, take a notebook and pen and visit the place so your child can observe and describe it firsthand.

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Appendix: Stumbling Blocks of Writing and Their Solutions

Stumbling Block #1: Lack of Confidence

Problem: *Lack of confidence due to poor writing guidelines and vague instructions or expectations.*

Solution: *Establish boundaries and give clear directions for each writing assignment.*

Stumbling Block #2: Limited Writing Skills

Problem: *Kids don't have the writing skills and tools they need to make stories, essays, or reports fresh and interesting.*

Solution: *Introduce prewriting exercises, brainstorming worksheets, and checklists.*

Stumbling Block #3: Lack of Motivation

Problem: *No motivation to write*

Solution: *Give kids a wide variety of writing experiences and allow them flexibility to choose topics.*

Stumbling Block #4: Limited Vocabulary

Problem: *Limited writing vocabulary that inhibits ideas and contributes to weak stories, essays, and reports.*

Solution: *Teach your student to develop and hone vocabulary by using a thesaurus and word banks.*

Stumbling Block #5: Perfectionism

Problem: *Self-criticism, perfectionism and writer's block go hand in hand.*

Solution: *Encourage your child to let go of precision by writing an unpolished rough draft that can be refined later.*

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Stumbling Block #6: Laziness

Problem: *The lazy child is unwilling to spend time planning, writing, and revising.*

Solution: *Offer structure, rewards, more consistent supervision, and opportunities for immediate success.*

Stumbling Block #7: Procrastination

Problem: *The procrastinator waits till the last minute to write her paper.*

Solution: *Break up assignments over time and provide accountability for your student.*

Stumbling Block #8: Parental Criticism

Problem: *Students feel criticized when parents evaluate their writing.*

Solution: *Use editing and grading tools that encourage objectivity and consistency.*

Stumbling Block #9: What's the Point?

Problem: (1) *Your student can't see a purpose for the assignment itself, or* (2) *she can't understand why she has to go through all the steps of the writing process.*

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