



Help! I Have a Reluctant Writer

*Strategies and Encouragement
for Homeschool Moms*

by Kim Kautzer

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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 a pastor with 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.

Are You Turning Your Child Off to Writing?

DO YOUR KIDS HATE WRITING? I totally empathize with you. As you've already learned, my son was the poster boy for reluctant writers!

These children approach a blank sheet of paper with emotions ranging from boredom to fear. Each attempt produces frenzied erasures, gray smudges, or tears of frustration.

They don't get why writing is so hard (or worse, why they're so bad at it), and they wallow in a whole heap of failure.

Homeschooling mamas want to create an atmosphere that fosters a love of writing. We want our kids to feel comfortable around paper and pencil—to know how to organize a brain filled with lively thoughts and express them in written form. But sometimes we get in the way of our own goals.

You may be turning your kids off to writing if...

1. You expect too much independence.

Younger students may not be ready to write on their own. After all, there's a lot involved in getting an idea from brain to paper! By the time your child wrestles with spelling or punctuation or a cramped hand, he's completely lost his grip on that "great" idea, and it vanishes into thin air.

Don't be afraid to help your child. While our girls were comfortable with writing at a young age, Ben had a terrible time forming words—let alone writing entire stories—even at age 10. That's why, instead of squishing the life out of his creative thoughts, I let him tell his stories orally while I acted as his scribe. In time, as he gained confidence and skill, he took over more and more of the writing until he was able to work independently.

2. You consider games and crafts “fluff.”

Most children learn best through hands-on activities, which help your child associate writing with fun! So rather than look at pre-writing activities as busy work, think of them as vital teaching aids. Let them play Mad Libs® or [other word games](#) to improve vocabulary, boost creativity, and gain new skills.

[Start here](#) to find loads of writing activities for different ages.

3. Writing assignments are too vague.

Want to sound the death knell for your child? Tell him to write about anything he wants! While some children have the confidence, creativity, and interest to embrace this freedom, most just stare glumly at their paper as anxiety mounts:

I can't think of anything to write about!

How long does it have to be?

What if I do it wrong?

A good assignment always includes clear goals; you're establishing boundaries for your children when you provide specific guidelines.

Define the nature of the assignment

Write a book report.

Describe a place.

Explain the steps involved in performing a task.

Explain the assignment's purpose.

Is it an exercise designed to build skills, or will it follow the writing process and become a polished final draft?

Will this become a report to accompany a science project, or is it simply an explanation of a concept to demonstrate his understanding?

Make sure tasks are specific and clear.

Write one 5- to 7-sentence paragraph.

Include a beginning, middle, and end.

Using all five senses, describe your favorite dessert.

Break the assignment into bite-size steps.

Give mini due dates along the way.

Check your child's work so you can offer encouragement and suggestions.

4. You focus on their mistakes.

As you [edit your child's paper](#), resist the inclination to draw blood from it by attacking every error with your red pen. Yes, you will be distracted by spelling errors, run-on sentences, and misused apostrophes, but don't let these prevent you from getting to the heart of your child's message.

Whether or not writing comes easily and naturally, your child has tremendous emotional attachment to his words. If you criticize his writing, he feels personally attacked.

Instead, search for the good!

1. Identify areas of growth.
2. Offer encouraging comments.
3. Point out places that show improvement over earlier assignments.
4. Highlight examples of strong word choice or proper sentence structure.

Writing is definitely a fluid process—and it can be taught many different ways. But with a few adjustments in attitude and approach, you can help your reluctant writers turn the corner.

Where will you begin?

10 Ways to Reduce Writing Stress

TEACHING WRITING CAN SEEM COMPLICATED and overwhelming—and for many homeschoolers, it's the most challenging, stress-inducing subject you teach. But you can lighten the load with a few small, simple adjustments to your normal teaching attempts. Try these ten tips on for size!

1. Don't let your child go it alone.

At every age, your child needs your involvement in the writing process, not just to give editing feedback, but to instruct and model. Like teaching your child to wash the car, crochet a hat, or clean the hamster cage, you'll need to remain involved until she is confidently and successfully progressing.

2. Give guidelines for the assignment.

I know I've mentioned this before, but one of the most frustrating assignments you can give a reluctant child is to ask her to write about whatever she wants. While it seems that this should inspire her, it can actually shut down her creativity altogether. Why? Because without guidelines, she feels like she's been tossed into a vast ocean and told to swim for shore!

Instead, provide clear instructions and lesson boundaries, which make her feel more secure. (See pages 7-8 and 13 for tips on setting boundaries.)

3. Offer choices.

An unmotivated student may benefit from having choices, such as deciding between several writing topics or choosing whether to do his writing assignment at his desk or the kitchen table.

4. Plan before writing.

When a student goes off on rabbit trails, he loses his focus and ends up with writing that's awkward or hard to follow. Help him create an outline or use a

graphic organizer before he begins so he's less likely to wander off the path. Work together, [modeling the brainstorming process](#) for your child.

5. Just write!

Though it's tempting for your student to try to correct everything as he goes, have him finish his rough draft without wrestling with every word, phrase, and sentence. That's what revising is for!

6. Kick perfectionism to the curb.

Perfectionism—personal pressure to “get it right the first time”—is [the mother of all stumbling blocks](#) and the key contributor to writer's block. Don't get hung up on perfection. Your child can always improve the rough draft. Remember: the creative process isn't always neat, tidy, and measured, and it's certainly not perfect!

8. Give deadlines.

Establish a due date for each writing assignment. When you don't give a deadline, you imply that your child can put the task off indefinitely. Set a cut-off date and stick to it.

9. Use writing checklists.

Children should begin using a checklist as a guide to help them identify errors in content, style, and mechanics. A checklist makes self-editing more objective by offering specific expectations to meet.

10. Bless your student's writing efforts.

Before you make a single correction on your student's paper, affirm her by helping her discover what's right about her story or report, [not just what needs fixing](#).

Be brave! Which of these tips will you try this week?

Tips for Conquering the Blank Page

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE A BLANK PAGE to ruin a perfectly good day.



We need to put words to paper, but they will not come. The blank page intimidates us. The objects in the room call, our eyes wander, and our mind runs to places that are more desirable. We struggle to come back to the page with pen in hand. In the meantime, the white space has grown in intensity, until it is blinding. –Richard Mansel, “[The Fear of the Blank Page](#)”

It can be a formidable foe, this empty field of white—especially for the child who struggles to coax even a short string of words from his reluctant pen.

Fortunately, there are simple things you can do to help the most reluctant student find his footing—or at least his voice. Let's look at eight ways you can encourage your child to face (and perhaps even conquer!) that blank sheet of paper.

1. Write First Thing

Consider starting the school day with a writing activity, while attitudes are still positive and minds feel more creative. Facing an unpleasant or challenging task earlier in the day—when your children are fresh and alert—may be the key to unlocking ideas.

2. Brainstorm Separately Before Beginning to Write

Jotting down random thoughts—no matter how jumbled—can help release a log jam of words and phrases. Encourage your kids to [brainstorm](#) before beginning any writing assignment.

3. Set Parameters for the Assignment

The vastness of total choice can overwhelm even the most eager writer, so help your child know what you expect from each piece of writing. For example:

- **Specify the kind of writing.** Will the composition be a personal narrative? A persuasive essay? A descriptive piece?
- **Let students choose** a topic within a particular genre such as mystery or adventure, or within a current area of study such as pioneer days or the Great Depression.
- **Give expectations** regarding composition length or number of sources you require.

4. Give Topic Options and Alternatives

Encourage students to write about favorite, familiar topics—*dogs, ballet, skateboarding, karate*. The more they enjoy the subject, the more vested they'll be in the writing project.

Rather than assign a report on a topic you've been studying, invite them to create a project where writing just one feature, such as a travel brochure featuring Marco Polo's journey or an alphabet book about your state .

5. Start with a Familiar Story or Personal Experience

Your children don't always have to come up with something unique—it's totally fine for them to retell a fable, fairytale, folktale, or other familiar story in their own words. Encourage them to mix things up by introducing a new character, setting the story in a new setting, or adding humorous situations.

Likewise, when they write from personal experience, the foundation of the story is already there. Have them create a storyboard by sketching several pictures depicting the experience as it unfolded. Older students can sequence the basic elements of the story in a numbered list. Once they have a basic structure, it's much easier to write the narrative and fill it in with descriptive details.

6. Provide a Photo

Pictures—especially those that “speak a thousand words”—make great prompts for generating story or narrative ideas. When searching for photos online, you'll want

to preview sites for appropriate content. That said, consider finding inspiration from one of these:

- [National Geographic Photography](#)
- [30 Examples of Perfectly Timed Action Photography](#)

7. Do Some or All of the Writing

I'm sure I sound like a broken record, but this bears repeating!

By the time a thought makes its way from brain to hand to paper, the reluctant or learning-challenged student has lost her grasp on the idea, and it simply drifts away. Let her express herself aloud while you record her thoughts. This allows you to capture those words before they dissipate. Once they're written, she can more easily rearrange and modify.

8. Encourage a “Rough Draft” Mindset

Students who think their first draft should be perfect can gain a lot from adjusting their thinking. Writing is a debugging process. Starting sloppy deals a blow to the blank page as the student plays with early 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.”

A blank sheet of paper may intimidate reluctant writers, but it is possible for them to overcome their fear and conquer the blank page!

Writing for an Audience

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION MEANS CHILDREN WRITE without any additional outside incentive. *No bribes. No treats. No money.*

But the truth is that few children are motivated by the sheer love of writing. So—short of paying them off with cash or candy—what can you do to inspire them?

Writers Need an Audience

Having an audience takes your child past the point of writing for a “requirement” or a grade—and it certainly takes him beyond writing just for his normal, everyday audience of one: *you*.

Importance of an Audience

You can spark renewed interest in writing by guiding your child to think of ways to broaden his understanding of what an audience can be. Help him experience how others can find pleasure in reading his work. He’ll be rewarded with increased joy and confidence, and you’ll begin to see his writing blossom as he takes more pride in his efforts.

Seeing Their Works in Print

When I taught writing classes years ago, we always ended the year with a Writers’ Tea. Our students invited friends and family, dressed up for the occasion, and recited poetry. At the end, we passed out class anthologies featuring samples of each student’s best writing.

As they pored over the stories and poems in the spiral-bound booklets, it was hard to miss how much the children enjoyed seeing their works in print! They took pride in sharing the anthologies with their parents and grandparents.

Think Outside the Box

An anthology is just one of many ways to publish. Following are some other suggestions for expanding your kids’ writing audience or showcasing their writing through their published projects. When they polish a story or poem so that it’s the best it can be—and when they go beyond the traditional “final draft” to create an interesting published project—they’ll be much more likely to write for the joy of it. Here are some ideas:

Publish Their Stories

Shape Books: Cut out shapes that match the story's theme (e.g., house, car, seashell or animal shape). Use cardboard or heavy cardstock for the top and bottom cover and grade-level lined paper for the pages. Staple edges, or lace the pages together with yarn.

Puzzle: Glue a photocopy of the child's story to a piece of cardstock. On the back, have her draw a picture about the story. Cut the cardstock into 8 or 9 simple puzzle pieces that a friend or family member can assemble.

Board Game: Suggest that your child create a board game about his story. Play the game with the family.

Journaling Notebook: Assemble your child's journal pages into a special notebook.

Cards and Letters: Help your child create a card on the computer. Or provide her with scrapbooking papers, punches, stickers, and other supplies so that she can make a fancy card for publishing her friendly letter or invitation letter.

Comedy Night: Have your child write & illustrate funny story. Host a special family Comedy Night. Start by having your young author share her humorous story. Then choose a funny cartoon to watch or a stack of silly books to read. Invite everyone to tell their favorite jokes.

Suitcase Story: For a story about a travel or vacation experience, make a suitcase out of a 12- x 18-inch piece of brown construction paper. Fold the paper in half and round the corners with scissors. Cut two handles from yellow or tan paper and tape them in place. Staple the child's final story inside the suitcase.

Publish Their Factual Reports and Book Reports

Lapbooks and Flap Books: These make great avenues for displaying facts, photos, drawings, and short reports. They work well for factual reports as well as for explaining the steps of a process. [Here are a few ideas](#) to help get you started.

Mobiles: Mobiles are a fun way to publish a report or book report! You can attach index cards or paper shapes to a length of string or yarn and hang them from a coat hanger or the rim of a paper plate. On one side of each card,

have the child write facts about his topic or details about a book's characters, setting, or action. On the back, he can illustrate.

Trivia Game: This is a great way to publish a younger child's short factual report. On the cover of a manila file folder, have the child write five questions about her topic and then staple the report inside. Let family members or friends try to guess the answers. Then they can open the folder and read the report to see if they were right!



Most of these fun and creative activities come straight from the pages of [WriteShop Primary](#) and [WriteShop Junior](#), two elementary writing programs that incorporate clever publishing ideas into every lesson.

One of the reasons I'm excited about **WriteShop Primary** and **WriteShop Junior** is the focus on letting your children ease into writing. As the parent, you gently guide, rather than push or force—definitely not the sort of program where you give an assignment and leave them to their own devices. Instead, you're encouraged to share in the entire process—including the actual writing.

Become Your Child's Pen Pal

Does your reluctant writer hate journaling (or writing in general)? Do you need a way to encourage this child? Try becoming pen pals!

This activity is best for children in the 8- to 12-year-old range, but you might also try it with other writing-phobic students who live at your house.

Getting Started

First, buy an inexpensive spiral notebook or composition notebook. If a colorful or thematic cover helps to wow your child, so much the better. Otherwise, a plain one will work just fine. Begin by writing an age-appropriate prompt at the top of the first page.

- *What's your favorite thing to dream about?*
- *Tell me something about you that I don't know.*
- *Would you rather wake up to fog or rain? Why?*
- *Tell me about your favorite book.*
- *What makes you feel scared?*
- *What makes you laugh?*

[Here's a good place to start](#) if you need more ideas.

Tell your child there are no rules, no right, no wrong. She must simply write about the given topic and express herself however she chooses. No critiquing is allowed!

At first, don't expect much; all she may give you is lists! But eventually she'll begin to write more, especially when she finds the prompt particularly appealing.

Turning the Tables

Next, let your child choose a prompt for you and write it on the next page so you can write back to her. Offering her the chance to ask you questions can give her a sense of fairness and control. Who knows what she'll want to know?

As your child's confidence grows and she becomes more willing to write, you'll start to get glimpses into who she is and how she thinks. Plus, you'll have a treasure of recorded "conversations" between the two of you.

Give it a try!

When a Teen Is Your Reluctant Writer

The first half of this e-book focused primarily on younger children. Certainly, many of the principles apply to all ages, but if your struggling writer is in junior high or high school, you may find the following chapters even more helpful.

Help Reluctant Writers Embrace the Process

QUICK! TAKE THIS SURVEY!

1. Do your teens complain about having to edit and revise their compositions and essays?
2. Do they hate having to spend several days on the same writing topic (brainstorming, writing a draft, self-editing, and revising)?
3. Do they become apathetic and lose steam by the time they get to the final draft?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, I have good news: *They're completely normal!* But short of dragging them across broken glass or hot coals, how can you teach them to embrace the steps of the process as a natural, *expected* part of writing?

Writing Is Hard Work

If you've not used a formal writing program before, it's possible that the writing process is new to your teens. Regardless, they're not alone. I wish there were a magic wand I could wave over them to help them like it better, but in truth, writing is hard work, and it takes time and discipline.

Unless they're [making lists](#), journaling, or emailing a friend, most writing does require planning, drafting, editing, and revising. This would be true whether you use [WriteShop](#), some other writing program, or simply create your own writing assignments.

Typically, students want to write a paper once and be done with it. They don't want to brainstorm, and they certainly don't want to rewrite it. But whether or not these steps of the writing process are built into the curriculum (as they are with WriteShop), it's really important for children to come to terms with the reality that this is how writers—from students to professional authors—write.

So . . . how do we go about helping reluctant writers—especially teens—grasp the importance of the writing process?

A Look at the Writing Process

There are three main parts of the writing process: *brainstorming*, *writing*, and *editing and revising*.

Brainstorming

The student who just sits down to write without having first brainstormed will either stare at the page with a blank look, unable to think of anything, or she'll write in a fairly disorganized fashion, repeat herself, include unnecessary detail, or omit key ideas.

Even in timed-writing sessions, students are encouraged to dash out a quick outline to help them focus on what the question is asking and to keep them from drifting off-topic as they write. Simply, brainstorming focuses a writer. It helps her choose details, plan and organize her story or report, stay on track, and avoid tangents.

Writing

Writing is done in stages. The first draft serves to get those rough, new ideas onto the paper. By its very design, the first draft is meant to be revised later.

Editing and revising

Whether or not your child agrees, every paper benefits from revision, and editing gives her a chance to make some modifications. Even this chapter was edited and revised many times before I was ready to publish it. I don't just try to catch typos; I also want to make sure my answers are complete and clear, my thoughts are organized, and my tone is professional yet conversational.

This self-editing process tends to be subjective for most of us because we feel an emotional attachment to each and every word. That's exactly why your child needs to turn her work in to you for objective feedback: She needs an outside opinion in order to write a more polished final draft.

Helping Your Student “Get It”

OK. You and I agree that the writing process is important. Yet the \$20,000 question remains: How do we get our kids on board? Again, there are no magic answers, but I can offer a few ideas:

Show your teen she’s not alone.

Your student may feel as though she’s the only one who has to plan, write, and revise her compositions. Discovering that the writing process is universal may help her back down a bit. For fun, you might ask her to do a Google search for the term “writing process.” I bet she’ll be surprised to find more than 50 million results!

Give freedom to a creative child.

It’s natural to expect a negative response from a reluctant, resistant writer. But if a student who normally loves writing fits this profile too, maybe she feels her creativity is being stifled when she is asked to brainstorm or make changes to her text.

First and foremost, give such a student the freedom to write for the sheer joy of writing—plays, stories, poems, whatever she loves! Separate these experiences from her writing lesson by not requiring her to plan or revise these stories. For her, use the writing process to teach skills in the same way that math drills, piano lessons, or other repetitive activities teach, reinforce, and offer practice. Let her write to her heart’s delight in her free time, but also require her to learn discipline through the structure of the writing process.

Use analogies.

You’re a parent, so I’m sure all this makes sense to you. The hard part is communicating it to your students. I find that analogies can help explain things so they can get it too. Here are several articles that deal with the writing process. Several offer different analogies that compare the writing process with things like *gardening*, *cooking*, *scrapbooking*, and *spelunking (caving)*. See if one or two of these analogies spark understanding in your reluctant writer.

- [Your child's writing: Garden or weed patch?](#)
- [What's your teen's favorite part of writing?](#)
- [6 simple truths about writing with kids](#)
- [How is a writer like a spelunker?](#)

Point to the future.

Students who go on to college quickly discover that the writing process is taught there as well. And as much as they may grumble and complain, it's to their benefit to plan, draft, and improve each piece of writing.

Among curriculum sites, public schools, universities, and professional writers' blogs and websites, the writing process is regarded as key to success. To help your teen see how vital these repetitive skills are, even at the college and professional level, here are a few outside sources that further explain the purpose and various stages of the writing process.

- [Vanderbilt University | The Writing Studio](#)
- [The Writing Process | MIT](#)

Start Young

In the end, there's no shortcut to bypass the writing process. Planning and revising are as important to a composition or essay's success as the actual writing.

The best way to avoid arguments, head-butting, and apathy is to train your children while they're young, perhaps using a program like [WriteShop Primary](#) or [WriteShop Junior](#). If they grow up with the writing process, they'll be more likely to accept and value it, even if they never learn to love it.

Writing Truths for Reluctant Teens

HOW CAN YOU ENCOURAGE RELUCTANT WRITERS when they feel stuck? What should you tell your high schoolers when they can't seem to get started writing? What advice can you offer when perfectionism rears its ugly head and they have trouble accepting their own mistakes?

Typically, you can't say or do much—especially if they're already in a funk. But if you can bite your tongue and sit on your hands till a teaching moment arises, they might be willing to consider one of these eleven truths.

1. It's not just you. I promise.

Writing isn't always easy. I'm sure you think you're the only one who suffers from writer's block, but it might help to know that even famous published authors will agonize over a word, a sentence, or a paragraph.

2. There's no penalty for a bad first draft.

"The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon." ~Robert Cromier

3. If you're stuck, explain to someone what you're trying to write.

My adult son is a former reluctant writer. But even to this day, as a Ph.D. student, he'll call me from time to time when he hits a writing roadblock. Often, I do nothing more than listen and offer the occasional "Mm-hmm." But the act of thinking aloud and tossing around ideas can open up the floodgate, and he finds that the log jam of words will finally loosen.

4. Set a timer.

Having trouble getting started? Grab a kitchen timer and set it for 15 minutes. You can do anything for 15 minutes, right? And some days, you may not even hear the beep.

5. To write well, it helps to read well.

Reading teaches you how words work. You can become more attuned to detail, imagery, voice, and sentence construction. There's no guarantee that being an avid reader will automatically make you a polished writer, but reading certainly lays a foundation for writing in many ways.

6. Style comes with practice.

Writing may not be second nature to you, but you will learn to develop your own writing style over time.

7. It's better to write poorly than not at all.

You can always improve your rough draft. Don't get hung up on perfection. Everyone revises!

"The first rule of writing is to write. The second rule of writing is to rewrite. The third rule of writing is the same as the second." ~Paul Raymond Martin

8. You can't write too many essays.

I know it's not your favorite, but essay writing is truly one of the most important college-prep skills you can acquire. On a regular basis, write essays related to other subjects of study such as literature and history. Practicing often with all types of essays—including timed essays—will make college writing that much less stressful.

9. Don't write and edit in the same sitting.

I can't tell you how many little errors I catch when I revisit a piece of my own writing even one day later! I know it's tempting to just "get it over with." But

really, you're much wiser to let that essay marinate for a couple of days. When you come back to it, you'll be more likely to see it with fresh eyes and be willing to make changes.

Of course, this means you can't wait till the last minute to write your rough draft!

10. Proofreading is a lifelong skill.

This is one of the most valuable writing skills you can acquire. The more adept you *become* at self-editing, the less you have to rely on others to point out flaws. Before you turn your paper over to your parent or teacher, proofread and revise it first.

- *Am I being too wordy?*
- *Repeating myself?*
- *Making my point?*
- *Varying my sentence structure?*
- *Using descriptive detail?*
- *Punctuating properly?*

Your writing will always benefit from a second set of eyes, but learning to edit your own work is a lifelong skill every student needs to develop. While you'll never be completely objective about your own writing, the ability to self-edit is just as important as having another person do it for you.

11. Edit your writing as if it were someone else's.

Take an emotional step away from your paper. Imagine that it was written by the kid who flips burgers at McDonald's, and begin to look for ways the writing could improve. It's much easier to be objective when you pretend that your composition isn't actually yours!

When Writing Efforts Fizzle



My child is a high school freshman, and thus far, our homeschool experience has not gone well where writing is concerned. Every program we've tried seems to fall by the wayside by Christmas break. Normally, she's an independent worker who does well with most self-directed assignments—except for writing. We just never finish."

DOES THIS SOUND FAMILIAR? If so, let's see if I can offer some advice to help you and your teen get back on track!

Parent Involvement vs. Student Independence

I'm all for fostering independence. As students enter the high school years, it's especially wise to train them to become more and more responsible for their own schoolwork. This means teaching them to break assignments into chunks, work on multiple projects, and stick to deadlines.

But even if a self-directed teen is successful in most academic subjects, she may still be floundering when it comes to writing assignments. This is largely because, for most students, writing must be taught. Good writing is the result of a partnership between a parent/teacher and the student.

Get involved!

A student who rarely finishes a writing assignment can't be left to learn writing on her own; clearly this approach is failing her. If this is true of your teen, you may need to step in and become more involved in teaching, guiding, editing, and grading her work. She may not appreciate your "interference," but if she's not succeeding on her own, something needs to change.

Begin by working closely with her to introduce, model, and teach new concepts. After that, let her work independently on her assignment. If she continues to struggle, misses deadlines, or fails to give her best effort, recognize that you'll need to spend more one-on-one time together while she writes. As she throws

herself more fully into her writing and gives effort to assignments, you can start backing off again.

Learn to Stick It Out

Sometimes a curriculum just isn't working and you need to take a different approach. But if you keep abandoning ship—specifically where writing is concerned—it's time to ask yourself why. This is especially important if you've tried several writing programs but find you never seem to finish any of them.

Is it a character issue—or an academic one?

Does your student:

- Complain about other subjects, sports, music lessons, or chores—or just about writing?
- Put up enough of a fight (about anything) that you toss up your hands in despair and give in to her complaints?
- Make such a fuss over writing in particular that it's easier to give up without finishing the program?

If this describes your home, consider working on the character qualities of diligence and perseverance. Students need to learn that sometimes, even though a curriculum is less than ideal, they can't just quit as soon as it gets too hard.

In the real world, they won't always have choices, but if they've gotten into the habit of abandoning something partway through when the going gets tough, it will be hard for them to practice stick-to-itiveness in the future. (For example, they'll be more likely to drop a college class the minute it begins to get challenging.)

Even if this stop-start-stop-start habit only applies to writing, I would still encourage you to decide on a course of action and commit to seeing it through. You'll probably agree it's time to make follow-through a priority.

Take a Different Tack

Perhaps you simply need a new approach to teaching writing. It's a legitimate possibility that your teen's learning style just hasn't meshed with other writing programs you've tried in the past. In this case, [WriteShop](#) might genuinely help you overcome the hurdles you've experienced.

For one, WriteShop expects parent involvement, yet fosters independence. Furthermore, WriteShop promotes the writing process through:

- Prewriting activities that set the stage for the writing assignment and get creative juices flowing.
- Brainstorming worksheets that help students develop ideas before it's time to write.
- Step-by-step instructions for writing that never leave kids wondering what, exactly, they're supposed to do.
- Short assignments (rarely longer than a paragraph) so they can work on sentence and stylistic skills.
- Activities and assignments that are broken up into bite-size portions over two weeks per writing lesson so as not to overwhelm a student.
- Detailed, lesson-specific self-editing checklists that enable students to proofread their own work and make corrections before handing their paper in to you.
- Parent checklists [and grading keys that help you give objective feedback.](#)

Have your student's writing efforts fizzled? Past writing failures don't have to be accurate predictors of future success. With a few adjustments in attitude and/or method, your teen can get back on track—and with time to spare.

About the Author



Kim Kautzer loves to encourage and equip parents who have a tough time teaching writing. From personal experience, she can identify with the feelings of failure that follow when blank paper, insecure parent, and reluctant child share the same space. Her inspiring workshops and informative [blog articles](#) reveal that teaching writing is more objective than you think, and with the right tools, you can guide and motivate struggling writers.

Kim and Jim make their home in Southern California. They homeschooled for 15 years, graduating their youngest in 2003. Kim thrives on travel, reading, gardening, Sunday crosswords, and their nine grandkids.

Award-winning [WriteShop](#), her unique and successful writing program, has been honored as one of Cathy Duffy's *102 Top Picks for Homeschool Curriculum*.