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Good Writing vs. Great Teaching

By Andrew Pudewa

Good Writing. What is it? Everyone has an opinion, but opinions differ widely. While one language arts curriculum judges that simply adding in more adjectives will “improve” sentences, other experts—quoting Mark Twain—suggest that adjectives and adverbs should be hunted down and killed. Although most people would agree that clear and to-the-point writing is best, few are able to balance the problem of how to teach conciseness while helping children develop more complete ideas and sophisticated expression. Over the past year, a few well known journalists and teachers have weighed in on the subject,¹ even going so far as to quote some popular teaching materials (ours among them), stressing the need for parents and teachers to help children write clearly and not be sucked into the dreadful habit of “overwriting.”

While journalists, English teachers, historians, technical writers, children’s book authors, poets, parents, and college students all have a right to their idea of what makes “good” writing, they must avoid making assumptions about the best way to develop linguistic ability in children based on the skills required for their own vocation. It is erroneous to assume that elementary age children should receive the same sort of writing instruction as high school essayists or university journalism students. Children differ not only in what they need to learn, but in how they best learn it. Therefore, how writing is taught must be adjusted to the developmental level of the child and the appropriate goals for each stage.

According to one interpretation of the “classical” model, children pass through three preparatory stages (the “trivium”) before embarking upon more advanced study (the “quadrivium”). These stages are often referred to as Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric. Whole books have been written to define these words, but for now a brief description is appropriate.

Grammar: A time when the child is primarily concerned with collecting facts—the grammar of life—about a wide range of subjects. Theory and reasons are not as necessary as the facts themselves. This is a corollary to Montessori’s “absorbent mind” period—a time when memorization, repetition, and recitation are of huge

educational importance. Although all children are different, this is the primary stage of children six to ten years old.

Logic: A time when children feel compelled to test the facts they have learned. They love to argue, debate, challenge, validate, or repudiate the reality they've been given. Reasons, causes, theories, and relationships are of greater interest during this stage, which is typical of pre-teens and adolescents.

Rhetoric: After facts have been learned and tested, they can be used. This is a time when creativity, artistry, and ingenuity can be stressed in all areas. Original thinking is the result of the combination and permutation of previously learned facts and relationships. Analytical thinking is possible because of its foundation of grammar and logic. For a detailed discussion of these stages and how to teach to them more effectively, study *Recovering the Lost Tools of Learning* by Doug Wilson.² Glen Doman,³ as a result of his work with brain-injured children (many of whom are stuck in the first stage for a long time), concisely stated the essence of Grammar-ness: *If you teach a child the Facts, he will intuit the Laws, but if you teach a child the Laws, he cannot intuit the Facts.* This explains in great part the failure of newer elementary math curricula with their emphasis on understanding operations rather than mastery of the facts themselves. Dr. Arthur Robinson recently noted that even the GRE exam primarily tests speed and accuracy in arithmetic and mastery of vocabulary—the two foundations upon which all learning rests.⁴

What we must do, applying these truths to teaching writing, is to focus on building linguistic aptitude during the grammar stage and refining it during the logic stage so it can be useful during the rhetoric stage. What the writing experts have suggested, it seems, is that we should give rhetoric-level instruction to grammar-level students; but what master teachers know is that this would be folly.

The work of a child is to play—not “play” in the frivolous sense—but to collect, manipulate, practice, and experiment with the stuff of life. Most often, their play is based on imitation. The Montessori approach capitalizes on this innate need magnificently. First, the lesson is modeled, usually silently and very precisely, for the child, who is then invited to try it—as often as they wish. If the lesson is not understood, the teacher simply presents it again, usually silently, as often as needed. Direct correction is minimal or non-existent. The child “plays” (experiments, practices) with the lesson until mastered. Play is the natural inclination of a healthy child and a highly effective learning and teaching tool.

Dorothy Sayers notes in her landmark essay, *The Lost Tools of Learning*, that even a carpenter will “play” with a new tool to get a sense of it before putting it to serious use.⁵ Therefore, if older students are lacking factual information and logical connections in any given area, they must first acquire that knowledge and practice using it before being expected to put it to creative use. One cannot successfully bypass the Grammar and Logic stage.

How does this relate to teaching English composition? Well, first we must set the linguistic foundation of the young child by saturating him with language through constant high-quality auditory input and large amounts of language memorization.⁶ Additionally, we must provide for the presentation of the facts, along with the opportunity to practice using them. In writing, the “grammar” or facts include vocabulary, usage, sentence patterns, organizational tools (paragraph, story, report, essay), decorations and special devices. These can be presented gradually or rapidly, according to the maturity of the student, but immediate mastery should be expected of no one.

The student must then “play with” these facts. In using adjectives, adverbs, strong verbs, clauses, prepositions, participles, very short sentences, and the like, the student gains a sense of confidence and gradually a sense of appropriateness in their usage. As in a Montessori classroom, re-presentation should be maximized; direct correction should be minimized. Certainly, we must gently lead the student toward better usage, but not at the expense of developing confidence and enthusiasm for trying new words. If teachers and coaches—in the name of following someone’s idea of what “good” writing is—begin to try to cut and prune the student’s language too early during the Grammar stage, they will find that their students linguistic ability becomes far less than it might have been had they postponed such advanced criticism. Later, during the Logic stage, and certainly during the Rhetoric stage, technique and artistry can be taught more successfully when built on a solid Grammar stage foundation.

Additionally we must consider the reluctant writer who has struggled all along. If he tries to stretch his vocabulary and usage but is then made to feel that his word experiments have failed to produce “good” writing, future attempts to use adjectives and adverbs, or anything at all “risky” will now be much less likely to occur. His interest in words will dwindle, he will “play it safe” in order to avoid being “wrong.” Aptitude will shrivel.

Let us encourage children to experiment and play with words, remembering that what they do and how they learn is vastly more important than what they produce. Children who are free to play with words will fall in love with words; time, maturity, and life will help them balance creativity, eloquence, and conciseness. It is okay, in fact good, for children to be bold with words—even to an extreme. We don’t know what they will be called to do in life. One may become a technical writer or a playwright while another may become a novelist or journalist. Our job is not to decide what is “good” or “right” and chisel too early, but to feed, nurture, encourage and build up the child with the “stuff” of language and the joy of using it. Our work is to help form the linguistic marble from which they will create their profession or vocation; and others will help carve it away. For a sculptor, more marble is better than less.

It is okay—even beneficial—for children to exaggerate with words. This is how they build their linguistic foundations. Children’s book authors know this well.

Take, for example, *Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. This book has a five-star rating everywhere it is sold and ranks in sales as number 439 on Amazon.com!⁷ Few journalists could stomach even the title, but for children it's a classic. Why? It builds their linguistic marble. They need the repetition, the categorization, the play of the words in that book. And besides, if everyone believed and followed the writing advice of journalism professors and writing experts, Dr. Seuss wouldn't exist, and Judith Viorst could never have written about Alexander's day in such an engaging way.

During the Grammar stage, what goes into the child's brain is much more significant than what comes out. Children's experience while learning is infinitely more important than what they can produce. Certainly output is part of experience, and much is learned by producing a product. However, we must remember to place the value on the process—not the product. This is hard, as we live in a very product-based, materialistic society, which always looks for results, proof, evidence, and profit—often at the wrong time and in the wrong place.

But keep all of this in perspective. Certainly we do agree with Twain, Barzun, Zinsser, and Olasky; good writing is simple, free of clutter, clear and specific. We must agree with Lewis, Hemingway, and Marks; it is important to avoid overwriting and to concentrate on ideas and information. However, to practice the discipline of writing as an adult at the post-Rhetoric level and to teach writing to children at the Grammar and Logic level are very different activities. Let us understand who we are teaching, and not become confused.

¹ Marvin Olasky. "The Write Stuff." *World Magazine* May 10, 2003: page 60.

Dave Marks. "Creative Writing." *Practical Homeschooling* May/June 2003: page 28.

² *Good News Publications* April 1991

³ Institutes for Achievement of Human Potential, Philadelphia, PA (www.iahp.org)

⁴ "How to Raise a Thinker." *Practical Homeschooling* Sept/Oct 2003: page 19.

⁵ Currently available at: www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html

⁶ Andrew Pudewa, "One Myth and Two Truths." <http://www.excellenceinwriting.com/>

⁷ As of January 26, 2004.