

Excellence in Writing

What is the Purpose of Excellence in Writing?

Based on the original work of Dr. J. B. Webster, professor emeritus of Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, and of Mrs. Anna Ingham, author of The Blended Sound-Sight Program of Learning, the Excellence in Writing program helps to give our students a base from which they may write effectively.

The Excellence in Writing program works on the premise that students must be given the basic tools of writing before they can write on their own.

So often in teaching our children to write, we hand them a piece of paper and say, "Create a story." This is similar to putting a child in front of a piano for the first time and expecting them to make up a new song. Frustration would most likely set in long before a song was created because the child would be trying to accomplish too many things at the same time without adequate preparation; he would be attempting to learn the different sound of each note, where each note is on the keyboard, and what notes can be put together (and at what tempo) to make a sound which is new and pleasing. The result would probably and understandably be a hatred for the piano.

Instead, an instructor would teach the child to play in easy to manage pieces. She would teach the child each and every note and have him practice playing them. Then she would give the child a song that he was familiar with and have him copy that song until he could play it well. The child might then learn a number of different songs in a variety of tempos, get used to hitting the keys appropriately, and eventually start combining patterns and tempos to make something that is his own. He would probably be successful because he was properly prepared before he was asked to complete the task.

Excellence in Writing's approach is similar to this. The child is not expected to "create" a story from nothing. Instead, he is given the tools in small, manageable steps with each following step building on the previous, so that, by the time the student is expected to "write from nothing," he is so well-equipped that the process is simple, and writing is no longer an object of hatred but a tool that can be utilized for academic success.

How Do Students Learn?

1. The process begins with the child reading or hearing a short story or excerpt from a text.

Statue of Liberty

The Statue of Liberty is a huge monument. It is located on Liberty Island, New York. It is built of copper and extends hundreds of feet into the air. The Statue of Liberty was given to the U.S. by France in 1884. It is a symbol of friendship. Over two million people per year come to see the Statue of Liberty. This large monument to freedom is world famous.

2. The teacher then leads the class through the process of choosing up to three key words from each sentence.

Statue of Liberty

1. huge monument
2. Liberty Island, NY
3. copper, hundreds high
4. given, France, 1884
5. symbol of friendship
6. 2 million, year
7. freedom, world famous

- The children then break into groups of two and attempt to retell the paragraph in their own words using only the key word outline. If they have difficulty, they may reread the text and then try again.
- When the children can comfortably retell the text in their own words, the original text is removed from view, and they will rewrite the text in their own words (this is modeled by the teacher at first).

A World Famous Monument
By Our Class

The Statue of Liberty is a huge monument on Liberty Island in New York. It is made of copper and is hundreds of feet high. In 1884 France gave it to America, and it is a symbol of friendship. About two million people come to see this statue each year. The Statue of Liberty is a world famous monument to freedom.

- As the students become more comfortable with this basic process, they are taught and encouraged to develop the paragraph by using stronger words (i.e. huge = enormous), adding descriptive words, varying sentence beginnings and lengths, combining or dividing sentences, etc. (See Openers and Dress-ups.)
- Later in the process, rather than rewriting a text, the students learn a system of asking questions about a given topic and answering them in the key word outline format. They can then write the paper in their own words. Because they are now comfortable with the basic tools of writing, they are able to make a smooth transition from copying to creating.

What are Openers and Dress-ups?

Openers

The sentence Opener is a device used to vary the way sentences begin. Students naturally tend to use a repetitive subject/verb format (i.e. The boy kicked a rock. It hurt his foot.) and it can make their writing seem formulaic and dull. However, the Openers offer the students a number of ways to begin their sentences, consequently making their writing more fluid and interesting.

There are six basic Openers:

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| 1. Subject | ❶ The boy kicked the rock. |
| 2. Prepositional | ❷ On Saturday the boy kicked the rock. |
| 3. "ly" (adverb) | ❸ Angrily the boy kicked the rock. |
| 4. "ing" | ❹ Kicking the rock, the boy hurt his foot. |
| 5. Clausal, (when, while, where, since, as, if, although, because, etc.) | ❺ When the boy kicked the rock, he hurt his foot. |
| 6. V.S.S (Very Strong Sentence, 2-5 words) | ❻ He angrily kicked the rock. |

The students begin by working with one Opener at a time, and they are eventually challenged to use all six Openers in each paragraph. They denote each Opener used by placing the number of the Opener in the margin. This allows them to keep track of which Openers they have used.

Dress-ups

The Dress-up is a device used to “dress up” the paper. As students add them to papers, their writing becomes stronger and clearer.

There are five basic Dress-ups:

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| 1. who/which | 1. Susan, <u>who</u> is a good reader, is smart. |
| 2. “ly” | 2. Susan is <u>incredibly</u> smart. |
| 3. strong verb | 3. Susan <u>scurried</u> through the yard. |
| 4. quality adjective | 4. Susan is an <u>avid</u> reader. |
| 5. when, while, where, as, since, if, although | 5. I smiled <u>when</u> I heard about the victory. |

As with the Openers, the Dress-ups are introduced one at a time until they become natural, and then the students are challenged to use all of them in each paragraph. The student will underline one of each Dress-up in order to keep track of which of them they have used.

In addition to Openers and Dress-ups, the students in the upper grades learn Decorations, Triple Extensions, and Advanced Dress-ups to further develop their writing abilities.

Note:

When students first begin using these techniques, their writing may seem awkward and clunky, much as the playing of a student who first sits down at a piano. However, just as instruction and practice lead to beautiful music, time spent working on these skills with the teacher and on their own will allow the students to create beautifully written stories and papers.