

# Why Writing Programs Fail

When I first began teaching literature and writing at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, over ten years ago, my freshmen weren't exactly polished writers. Out of every class of thirty freshmen students, four or five would turn in grammatically correct, coherent, clean papers. Of those, perhaps two would show a real grasp of persuasive writing.

Ten years later, even that percentage has dropped. I read through scores of incoherent, fragmented, unpunctuated papers, written by students who graduated from well-funded high schools with small classrooms and qualified teachers.

What are those students being taught before they get to me?

It's not that they don't write. In fact, in an effort to solve the problem of poor writing skills, schools are giving longer and more complex assignments to younger and younger children. The theory is that the more writing children do, the better they'll get at it; as one proponent of it recently told me, "Give the children high-interest assignments and have them write, write, write and revise, revise, revise." First and second graders are told to write journal entries; third and fourth graders are assigned book reports and essays. Fifth and sixth graders are given research papers.

Meanwhile, writing skills continue to decline. And for the last ten years, at education conferences all across the country, I have heard the same refrain from the parents of these children: *My child hates to write.*

There's a central problem with the write-more-and-you'll-get-better method. It treats writing as though it were analogous to speech: the more deeply you're immersed in it, the more competent you'll become.

*But writing is essentially unlike speaking.* Children have an instinctual, inborn

desire to speak. Any child who is developing normally will learn to speak if spoken to. The more a child talks, the better her verbal skills become.

Children don't have that same innate drive to write. Some children scribble as soon as they can hold a pencil, but the majority don't. Even children who are taught to read and are surrounded by written language do not necessarily learn how to write—because speech and writing are fundamentally different.

Writing, unlike speech, isn't a natural activity. Mankind survived for a very long time without finding it necessary to put anything down on paper. Until the nineteenth century (which is quite late, in the larger scheme of things) even the largest empires chugged along perfectly well with shockingly low literacy rates. Administrators and bureaucrats had to be able to read and write, but the masses functioned quite well without paper and pencil. If they'd been unable to talk, on the other hand, their country would have fallen apart.

Written language is an unnatural foreign language, an artificially constructed code. Compare written dialogue with any transcript of an actual conversation, and you'll see that written language has entirely different conventions, rules, and structures than spoken language. The rules of this foreign language must be learned by the beginning writer—and they have to become second nature before the beginning writer can use written language to express ideas.

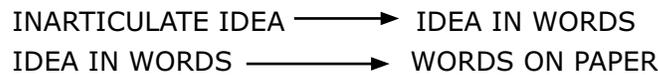
This is why so many young writers panic, freeze, weep, or announce that they hate to write. Try to put yourself in the position of the beginning writing student: Imagine that you've had a year or so of conversational French, taught in a traditional way out of a textbook, with practice in speaking twice a week or so. After that first year, your teacher asks you to explain the problem of evil in French. You're likely to experience brain freeze: a complete panic, a frantic scramble for words, a halting and incoherent attempt to express complicated ideas in a medium which is unfamiliar. Even another year or two of study won't make this kind of self-expression possible. Rather, the conventions of the French language need to become second nature, automatic—invisible to you—so that you can concentrate on the ideas, rather than on the medium used to express them.

The same is true for young writers. Ask a student to express ideas in writing before she is completely fluent in the rules and conventions of written language, and she'll freeze. She can't express her thoughts in writing, because she's still wrestling with the basic means of expression itself.

I have become convinced that most writing instruction is fundamentally

flawed because children are never taught the most basic skill of writing, the skill on which everything rests: how to put words down on paper.

Writing is a process that involves two distinct mental steps. First, the writer puts an idea into words; then, she puts the words down on paper.



Mature writers are able to do both steps without paying much attention to the fact that their brains are actually carrying out two different operations. But for the beginning writer, even a simple writing exercise (“Write down what you did this morning”) requires the simultaneous performance of two new and difficult things. And so the student struggles—just as a baby who has barely learned to walk will struggle if you simultaneously ask him to perform some other task (such as rubbing his head). All of the baby’s attention needs to go into moving his feet, until that action becomes automatic. If you ask him to walk and rub his head, he’ll probably freeze in one place, swaying back and forth uncertainly—just like many new writers.

Young writers need time to learn the conventions of their new language. They need to become *fluent* in it before they can use it to express new ideas. But in most cases, students are simply immersed in this new language of writing. While immersion techniques often work for spoken foreign languages, they don’t work nearly as well for writing—which is, after all, an artificial code rather than a natural speech expression.

Occasionally, this process produces a perfectly willing and competent writer—one who has a natural affinity for writing, and can intuitively grasp those parts of the process which have not been explicitly taught. But other students remain puzzled. They became frustrated and resistant, always struggling with the task of getting words on paper, never competent enough to let their ideas flow out.

Instead, the process of writing needs to be taught in an orderly, step-by-step method that will set young writers free to *use* their medium rather than wrestle with it.

# The Three Stages

This book is a foundational text: it focuses on those all-important early years of writing. In these elementary years (roughly, grades one through four) the student masters the new and unfamiliar process of writing: putting ideas into words and putting those words down on paper.

He will begin by pulling apart the two steps of writing and practicing them separately. This is the essence of good teaching: breaking tasks down into their component elements and teaching students how to perform each element, before putting the elements back together. The pianist practices first the right hand, and then the left hand, before putting the two together; the young writer practices putting ideas into words, and then putting words down on paper, before trying to do both simultaneously.

Good writing requires *training*. It demands one-on-one attention. What follows will equip you to *train* the young student in the language of writing.

## Writing with Ease (Years 1–4)

Elementary-school writing consists of copywork, dictation, and narration, all of which develop the student's basic skills with written language.

### *Years One and Two: Practicing Narration*

Before requiring the student to write, teach him to *narrate*. Narration happens when the student takes something he's just read (or heard you read) and puts it into his own words.

This begins on a very simple level: You read to the student and ask him specific questions about what he's heard, such as "What was the most interesting thing in that story?" or "Who was that history lesson about?" You then require

him to *answer you in complete sentences*. As the student grows more familiar with the process of narration, you can move on to more general questions such as “Summarize what we just read in your own words.”

As the young student narrates out loud, he is practicing the first part of the writing process: putting an idea into his own words. He is practicing a new and difficult skill without having to come up with original ideas first; because his narrations are always rooted in content that he’s just read or heard, he can concentrate on the task of expressing himself with words.

He is also practicing this new skill without having to worry about the *second* part of the writing process: putting those words down on paper. As he narrates, you—the teacher—write the words down for him as he watches. He can simply concentrate on the task at hand, without worrying about the mechanical difficulties of wielding a pencil. (For students whose fine motor skills are still developing, this is *essential*; they cannot focus on narration if they’re also contemplating how much their hand is going to hurt when they have to write the narration down.)

#### *Years One and Two: Copywork and Dictation*

Separately, and preferably at a different time during the day, the student begins to master the second part of the process: putting words down on paper. This is not a simple task. It requires physical labor, fine motor coordination, and an understanding of the rules that govern written presentation: capitalization, punctuation, spacing, letter formation.

This skill is developed through copywork and dictation. Copywork and dictation allow the student to master the second step of the process without having to worry about the first, difficult task of putting ideas into words.

The beginning student doesn’t even know yet how written language is supposed to look. Before he can put words down on paper, he must have some visual memory of what those words are supposed to look like. So during first grade, he’ll copy out sentences from good writers, practicing the look and feel of properly written language.

Once the student has become accustomed to reproducing, on his own paper, properly written sentences placed in front of him as a model, you’ll take the model away. Now that his mind is stocked with mental images of properly written language, he needs to learn how to visualize a written sentence in his mind and then put it down on paper.

From second grade on, rather than putting the written model in front of the student, you will dictate sentences to him. This will force him to bring his memory into play, to picture the sentence in his mind before writing it down. Eventually you'll be dictating two and three sentences at a time to a student, encouraging him to hold longer and longer chunks of text in his mind as he writes.

Many students who struggle with writing put down sentences that are lacking in punctuation, capitalization, or spacing—a clue that they have never learned to picture written language in their minds. Others can tell you with great fluency exactly what they want to write; if you then say to them, “Great! Write that down!” they'll ask, “What did I just say?” Both are clues that students have not learned to visualize sentences and hold them in mind—both essential if the student is ever going to get words down on paper. Moving from copywork to dictation develops these skills.

*Years Three and Four: Putting the Two Steps Together*

Around third grade, most students are ready to begin putting the two skills together. In third grade, students will begin to use part of their own narrations as dictation exercises. They will tell you the narration; you will write it down for them, and then dictate the first sentence back to them. Eventually they will learn that, in order to write, all they need to do is put an idea into words (something they've practiced extensively through narration), and then put those words down on paper (which they're accustomed to doing during dictation).

They will begin to write.

During the last two years of the elementary grades, you will concentrate on drawing the two skills together for the student. Some students will be able to bring the two steps together instinctively, without a struggle. But many need to be led through the process gradually, with plenty of practice, so that it can become second nature—and if they are not given this practice, they continue to struggle into middle school, high school, and beyond.

*What You're Not Doing*

But what about journaling, book reports, and imaginative writing?

In Years One through Four, it's not necessary for the student to do original writing. In fact, original writing (which requires not only a mastery of both steps of the writing process, but the ability to find something original to *say*) is beyond the developmental capability of many students.

There is plenty of time for original writing as the student's mind matures.

During the first four years, it is *essential* that students be allowed instead to concentrate on mastering the process: getting ideas into words, and getting those words down on paper.

Some children may be both anxious and willing to do original writing. This should never be discouraged. However, it should not be required either. Students who are required to write, write, write during elementary school are likely to produce abysmal compositions. Take the time to lay a foundation first; during the middle- and high-school years, the student can then build on it with confidence.

*What Comes After the Fundamentals?*

You're preparing your student to move into Years Five through Eight, the middle grades, when she'll learn how to put ideas in order; this in turn will prepare her for Years Nine through Twelve, the high-school study of rhetoric (persuasive communication). Although you don't need to know what comes next in order to lay a strong foundation, I suggest that you read on so that you can gain an overview of the entire writing process.

Alternately, you can go directly to "Where Should I Begin?" on page 25, and start building that foundation right away.

## **Writing with Skill (Years 5–8)**

In the middle grades the student learns to organize sentences into short compositions.

By now, he can put ideas he's already read into his own words and get those words down on paper without difficulty. The technical difficulty of learning the act of writing has been conquered. But until the student can begin to think about the *order* in which ideas should be set down, he'll continue to struggle with written composition. So during the middle-grade years, you'll help the student develop a toolbox of strategies for putting ideas into order.

Learning how to *order* ideas takes place on the microlevel (the sentence) and also on the macrolevel (the composition itself).

*Diagramming: Sentence-Level Ordering*

The primary tool that students will use to order ideas on the sentence level is diagramming. The middle-school student will learn to think critically about the structure of his sentences; he will use diagramming as a tool to fix weak sentences.

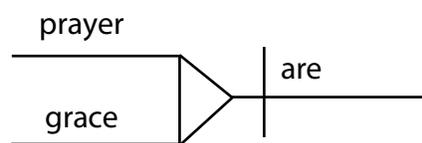
Weak sentences reveal problems in thinking.

A sentence which fits logically together is a sentence which is written in good style (poor style is most often the result of fuzzy thinking). Now that the student can get sentences down on paper, he needs to sharpen and focus them. Whenever a sentence doesn't "sound right" to him, he should examine the logical relationships between the parts of the sentence. Diagramming the sentence lays the logic of the sentence bare.

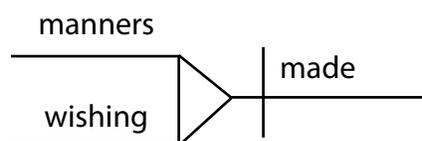
Consider the following balanced and beautiful sentence, from nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Our prayer and God's grace are like two buckets in a well; while the one ascends, the other descends." Compare the sound of this sentence to a typical freshman composition thesis statement (this from an actual seminar paper I received several years ago from a student): "In *Pride and Prejudice*, her mother's bad manners and wishing to get married made Elizabeth discontent." While the second sentence makes sense, it's an ugly sentence—the kind that makes parents and teachers despair.

If the middle-grade student is able to diagram both sentences, she'll be able to see for herself why the first sentence resonates, while the second clunks.

In the Hopkins sentence, the subject and verb of the first independent clause are diagrammed like this:



The second sentence also has a compound subject and single verb:



Although the second sentence is grammatically correct, it's ugly because the two subjects are two different kinds of words. "Manners" is a noun, while "wishing" is a gerund—a verb form *used* as a noun. Words which occupy parallel places on a diagram should take the same form—as in the Hopkins sentence, where "prayer" and "grace" are both nouns.

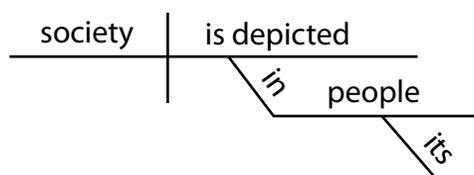
If the student sets out to fix the style problem in the second sentence, she'll also be forced to clarify her thinking. The noun "manners" represents something that Elizabeth's mother is doing *to* her; it's an outside circumstance. The verb form "wishing" is internal; it's Elizabeth's own action which is forcing her to be discontent. The two causes of her discontent aren't parallel. So what is the relationship between them? Do the mother's bad manners represent an entire social sphere from which Elizabeth longs to escape? Does she wish for a more genteel life, and does she wish to get married because that will allow her to move from one kind of life to another? Or is marriage itself Elizabeth's driving passion? Does she simply resent her mother's bad manners because they jeopardize her chances of attracting a bridegroom?

The middle-grade student won't necessarily understand all of this, but learning to diagram sentences will allow her to begin to understand the relationship between style and thought. Bad style is almost always a thinking problem, not a surface blemish.

For a slightly different illustration of this, consider the following sentence, also drawn from a freshman composition assignment, and containing a very common sort of beginning-writer error: "In addition to the city, Theodore Dreiser's society is depicted in its people."

This is the kind of sentence that *almost* makes sense; it's clear that the writer has an idea in mind, but that idea isn't coming through to the reader. But how can the student locate the problem?

Through diagramming. In this case, the subject (society) and verb (is depicted) are diagrammed on a simple subject/verb line, with the prepositional phrase "in

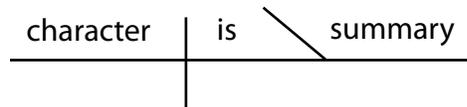


its people" diagrammed underneath the verb (it is acting as an adverb, because it answers the question "how"). But where should "In addition to the city" go?

It doesn't seem to fit anywhere. Are the society and city both depicted? (If so, what's the difference?) Is the society depicted in its people or in its city? (Neither is particularly clear.) The moral of this particular diagramming exercise: if you can't put it on the diagram, it doesn't belong in the sentence. The author of this

sentence doesn't exactly know what Dreiser is depicting, and he's hoping to sneak his fuzzy comprehension past the reader.

One final example, this one slightly more subtle: "Therefore, the character of Irene is a summary of women of the time." This is a very common sort of beginner sentence: it makes sense, but it sounds immature. Why?



The tip-off to the problem is the slanting line, which indicates that the noun to the right is a predicate nominative. A predicate nominative must *rename* the subject. But "summary" is not another word for "character." The two are not even roughly parallel; a character can't be a summary any more than an elephant can be a mouse.

Diagramming teaches style, through clarifying the student's thought process; it begins to force the student to order ideas.

#### *Outlining: Composition-Level Ordering*

In this phase of the writing process, the student learns how to outline.

Writing programs suggest all different ways for students to brainstorm for ideas: drawing webs, free-writing, clustering, even making collages. But whatever brainstorming method the student uses, he cannot start writing until he knows in what order his ideas should be put down. He needs an entrance point, an orderly plan that will tell him: *First explain this idea; then explain how this and this relate to it; then move on to this observation.* Without such a plan, he will either panic, or wildly set down ideas in random order.

The student's ability to plan out and use an outline will not reach maturity until the high-school years. The middle-grade years are training years—a period of time in which the student learns the skills of outline-making.

This skill has two parts. First, the student needs to learn the technical skill of outlining: the correct form.

#### I. MAIN POINT

##### A. First supporting point

##### 1. Additional information about first supporting point

##### a. Detail about that additional information

B. Second supporting point

1. Additional information about that second supporting point
2. More additional information about that second supporting point

II. NEXT MAIN POINT

III. NEXT MAIN POINT

and so forth.

Second, the student needs plenty of experience in outline construction.

The narration exercises of Year One allowed the student to order ideas naturally—chronologically, or possibly by putting the most interesting ideas first. But in Year Two, the student must develop one of the central skills in critical thinking: ranking information in order of importance, and figuring out the relationship between different assertions.

Outlining trains the mind in this skill. The most important assertions are marked I, II, III; the information that directly relates to those assertions is marked A, B, C; the facts that relate to *those* points are marked 1, 2, 3, and so on.

A well-planned composition should be outlined. But before asking students to outline their own original ideas, the thoughtful teacher gives them plenty of practice in outlining *other* writing. Careful educators never ask a student to do a task which has not first been modeled; a beginner can't do something that he has never seen done.

So between fifth and eighth grade, the student practices outlining pages from history and science (never fiction, which follows different rules). This skill should be developed slowly and carefully. In fifth grade, the student learns to pick out the central idea in each paragraph: the I, II, III, IV (and so on). In sixth grade, he learns to pick out the central idea along with one or two supporting facts. In seventh and eighth grade, he learns to pick out the central idea, the supporting facts, and additional details about the supporting facts.

In the early stages, while the student is learning to outline, she will continue to practice writing narrative summaries, using this now-familiar form as a platform to practice sentence style and structure. But by sixth and seventh grade, the narrative summaries will give way to a more advanced form of writing: writing from an outline.

After making an outline of a passage, the student will put the original away and then rewrite the passage, using only the outline. Then she'll compare her assignment with the original. Again, this is preparation for mature high-school

writing; before the student is given the task of coming up with an outline and writing from it, she needs to see how *other* writers flesh out the bones of an outline.

*What You're Still Not Doing*

Up to this point, the student has not been required to do a great deal of original writing (although many students may choose to do so). But the student is nevertheless doing an enormous amount of writing practice: every day from first grade on, she's been either copying, taking dictation, writing down narrations, outlining, or writing from someone else's outline.

All of this practice is necessary so that the student can come up to the high-school start line equipped and ready to go, prepared to launch into the full-fledged study of rhetoric.

It's important to resist the my-child's-writing-more-than-your-child pressure. Your neighbor's seventh grader may be doing a big research paper, while your seventh grader is still outlining and rewriting. Don't fret. Those research papers have been thrown at that seventh grader without a great deal of preparation. He's probably struggling to figure out exactly what he's doing, making false start after false start, and ending up with a paper which is largely rehashed encyclopedia information. I've taught scores of students who went through classroom programs which had them doing book reports, research papers, and other long assignments as early as third grade. This doesn't improve writing skill; it just produces students who can churn out a certain number of pages, when required.

As someone who's had to read those pages, I can testify that this approach is not, across the board, working.

A decent research paper requires skills in outlining and in persuasive writing that fifth, sixth, and seventh graders have not yet developed. Instead, in fifth through eighth grade, students should be writing constant short compositions, developing necessary skills before being required to carry those skills through into an extended piece of work. They will begin to learn the skills of researching, documentation, and argumentation, but the full exercise of these skills will not take place for several more years.

In summary: in the middle grades, students should learn to diagram, outline, and then write from an outline. This is essential preparation for the high-school stage—the full-fledged study of rhetoric.

## **Writing with Style (Years 9–12)**

In high school, the student—now fully equipped with the basic skills needed to produce an essay—begins to study rhetoric. He will use the tools of the *progymnasmata*, something which has almost fallen out of modern writing courses.

In ancient and medieval rhetoric, a certain set of exercises (beginning with such simple exercises as retelling a narrative in your own words, working up to more complex assignments such as proving an argument by supplying examples and analogies, or disproving an argument through reasoning) became standard among teachers of rhetoric. These exercises, known broadly as the *progymnasmata* (“preliminary exercises,” because they preceded the mature exercise of rhetoric), were generally undertaken by older students, and in most cases young writers need a certain amount of time and maturity before they can benefit from the *progymnasmata* exercises. Now, however, students will begin original writing in earnest, and the *progymnasmata* exercises will give them the skills necessary to express their own ideas with grace and fluency.

The persuasive expression of ideas is the central focus in high-school writing. The ability to assert an opinion, and then to defend it with reason and rhetoric, is central to the teenager’s sense of himself: until you know what you think and believe, and can explain *why* you believe it, you remain immature. “It is absurd,” Aristotle declared, in his own treatise on rhetoric, “to hold that a man should be ashamed of inability to defend himself with his limbs, but not ashamed of an inability to defend himself with speech and reason; for the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs.” In other words, articulate and persuasive speech is part of what *makes* us human.

So the rhetoric course should involve not just training in forms, but in words: What kinds of openings are best suited for different subjects? Is it more effective to write a series of short sentences, or several long ones with subordinated clauses? Should I appeal to analogy, use a metaphor, or avoid both? And many more considerations.

### *The Thesis Statement: Deciding What to Write About*

Before the student can put the *progymnasmata* skills to work in writing, he must be able to come up with a thesis statement.

A thesis statement is a proposition you can defend, a statement you can prove or disprove, or an assertion that has to be supported by evidence. A thesis statement is not just a statement of fact. In most cases, the first topical statement

a student comes up with when he decides to write is a statement of fact, not an assertion that can be proved.

Homer and William Blake both talk about nature.  
Jane Austen's characters can't be open about their feelings.  
Hamlet had a fatal flaw.

All of these are statements of fact, not thesis statements. Yes, Homer and William Blake both talk about nature; this is an observation that can be proved true with a single glance at each. Yes, Jane Austen's characters can't be open about their feelings; this is right on the surface of every character interaction. Of course Hamlet had a fatal flaw; that's why he (and practically everyone else) dies. A paper that begins with a statement of fact can only go in one direction: listing examples, something which rapidly becomes very boring indeed.

There is, of course, a place for developing statements of fact: the traditional research paper. The high-school student will learn to produce these papers, but he'll find that college writing (and mature adult writing after education ends) tends to reward skills in persuasive writing—despite the fact that the research paper is often the capstone of high-school writing programs.

In order to write a persuasive composition, students need to be able to take that initial statement of fact and turn it into a thesis statement. Beginning thesis-writers can use three questions that will help guide them from the opening statement towards the formulation of a thesis.

The first question: How are these things the same, and how are they different? Blake and Homer both talk about nature, which is the obvious similarity between the two. But what's the difference? *Homer sees nature as a hostile force to be reckoned with while Blake sees nature as a friend of man.* This assumes the fact (that they both talk about nature) but then makes an assertion about it: the two men treat nature differently. This kind of paper—the comparison/contrast paper—is often the best place for a beginner to start.

The second question: Why? In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth *pretends to conceal her feelings, but she actually reveals them to Mr. Darcy in many subtle ways.* It's a given that Elizabeth can't be open about her feelings, the question is *why?* In her case, she is restricted by the polite society around her, forced to find more indirect ways of showing her emotions.

The third question: When? *Hamlet is sane throughout most of the play, but goes mad during the duel.* This assertion argues that there's a transition point in the play where Hamlet moves into insanity—something that the writer will now have to prove by analyzing Hamlet's speeches and actions.

*The Progymnasmata: Techniques of Persuasion*

The high-school years are the time for students to study the techniques of effective persuasion. During Years Nine through Twelve, the high-school student will progress through a systematic study of the progymnasmata: among other skills, these teach writing a variety of narratives (condensed, amplified, biographical, and more), using different modes of narrative (direct, indirect, interrogative, comparative), mastering the art of description, learning how to use such sentence-level strategies as parallelism, parataxis, and multiple coordination, supporting arguments through reasoning and anecdote, using dialogue, and much more.

As part of the progymnasmata exercises, the student will analyze different kinds of writing, outlining them and becoming familiar with their forms. This will involve some rewriting from outlines, as in the middle grades, but the purpose of *this* rewriting is not to learn how to outline, but rather to develop knowledge of different styles and methods of argumentation.

*Constant Short Papers*

Throughout the high-school years, as he works through the progymnasmata, the student should write three to five one-page papers per week, taking his topics from literature, history, science, and his other high-school courses. Every time the student has to complete a one-page paper, he has to go through the process of formulating a thesis statement, deciding on a form and a strategy, constructing an outline, and writing from it. This constant repetition is much more valuable than two or three long writing projects undertaken over the course of the year.

In the last two years of high school, students should *also* pursue those longer projects, completing at least two lengthy research-style papers on a topic of their own choosing. These longer papers make use of the skills developed by the short papers, and also stretch the student towards a more detailed and complex form.

Rather than rushing to push children into more mature tasks, the twelve-level progression I've outlined takes the time and trouble to *prepare* students for writing. The goal is to turn the young writer into a thoughtful student who can *make use* of written language, rather than struggle with it.

## Year One, Weeks 1–3

year one – week 1

The student begins with very brief copywork sentences of four to eight words, practicing capitalization and end punctuation marks. The beginning narration exercises allow the student to practice recollection and speaking in complete sentences; these exercises are short as well, around two paragraphs.

Week 1 spells out these developments; Weeks 2 and 3 are modeled on the Week 1 pattern.

### WEEK 1

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#### DAY ONE: The First Copywork Exercise

When the student first begins copywork, be sure to sit with him as he copies. Although it seems natural to you to reproduce the capitalization and punctuation in the model, the student hasn't yet learned to notice the proper form of written language. If he begins to write the first letter as a small letter, stop him before he finishes the letter and remind him of the rule: "What does a sentence begin with? A capital letter." If he forgets to leave a space between words, remind him to use his finger as a spacer; if he ignores the punctuation at the end of the sentence, say, "What does a sentence end with? A punctuation mark. What kind of punctuation mark is that?" Never allow the student to write incorrectly; the whole purpose of the exercise is to accustom him to the look of *correct* written language. And since the physical act of writing is so difficult for young students, always allow him to erase and correct; never require him to recopy.

Copy out one of the following sentences on first-grade lined paper, in neat print handwriting, for the student to copy. Choose whichever length is appropriate to the student's handwriting ability.

Explain to the student that these sentences are from the first chapter of *Little House in the Big Woods*, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. *Little House* is about a family that lives in Wisconsin in the 1860s, in a deep forest where few others live.

There were no roads.

The deer and the rabbits would be shy and swift.

Ask the student to copy the sentence in pencil on the line below the model. Point out to the student that this is a complete sentence; it begins with a capital letter and ends with a period.

**DAY TWO:** The First Narration Exercise

When doing the first narration exercise, remember that the goal is to teach the student to express herself in complete sentences. If she answers you in fragments, repeat the answer back to her in a complete sentence, and then have her repeat that sentence after you. If the student can't answer the question, read the part of the passage that contains the answer and then ask the question again.

When all of the questions have been answered, ask the student, "What is one thing that you remember about the passage?" If the student cannot answer you, ask one of the questions again, and take the answer as the narration.

If she answers in several sentences, ask her which of those sentences is the most important. Distinguishing between central facts and details is a skill which will be fully developed in the second phase of writing (Years 5–8, roughly corresponding to middle school and junior high). But it is important for the student to begin now to learn how to pick important facts out of a passage, rather than simply repeating all of the information.

Read the following passage to the student:

Once upon a time, sixty years ago, a little girl lived in the Big Woods of Wisconsin, in a little gray house made of logs.

The great, dark trees of the Big Woods stood all around the house, and beyond them were other trees and beyond them were more trees. As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. There were no houses. There were no roads. There were no people. There were only trees and the wild animals who had their homes among them.

—From *Little House in the Big Woods*  
by Laura Ingalls Wilder

*Writing with Ease: Strong Fundamentals*

Ask the following questions:

**Instructor:** How many years ago does this story happen?

**Student:** *This story happens sixty years ago.*

*(If necessary, you can explain to the student that this book was written in the 1920s. When Laura Ingalls Wilder was writing this first chapter, her childhood in the 1860s was sixty years ago. Now, we would say that the story happened almost 150 years ago!)*

**Instructor:** Where did the little girl live?

**Student:** *She lived in Wisconsin OR in the big woods of Wisconsin.*

**Instructor:** If a man went north for a whole month, what would he find?

**Student:** *He would find more woods.*

**Instructor:** There were no roads in the Big Woods. Can you remember two other things that the Big Woods did not have?

**Student:** *There were no houses. There were no people.*

**Instructor:** Who *did* live among the trees?

**Student:** *Wild animals lived among the trees.*

Ask, “What is one thing you remember about the passage?” Write the student’s answer down on first-grade lined paper as he watches. This answer can be the same as one of the answers above.

**DAY THREE:** Copywork

Copy out one of the following sentences on first-grade lined paper, in neat print handwriting, for the student to copy. Choose whichever length is appropriate to the student’s handwriting ability. Both of these sentences are also from *Little House in the Big Woods*.

Pa owned a pig.

There was plenty of fresh meat to last for a long time.

Ask the student to copy the sentence in pencil on the line below the model. Point out to the student that this is a complete sentence; it begins with a capital letter and ends with a period.

**DAY FOUR:** Narration Exercise

Read the following passage to the student. Explain that the Ingalls family needed the pig so that they would have meat to eat in the winter; since there were no grocery stores, Pa had to raise the pig for food.

Once in the middle of the night Laura woke up and heard the pig squealing. Pa jumped out of bed, snatched his gun from the wall, and ran outdoors. Then Laura heard the gun go off once, twice.

When Pa came back, he told what had happened. He had seen a big black bear standing beside the pigpen. The bear was reaching into the pen to grab the pig, and the pig was running and squealing. Pa saw this in the starlight and he fired quickly. But the light was dim and in his haste he missed the bear. The bear ran away into the woods, not hurt at all.

—From *Little House in the Big Woods*  
by Laura Ingalls Wilder

Ask the following questions:

**Instructor:** What did Laura hear when she woke up?

**Student:** *She heard the pig squealing.*

**Instructor:** What did Pa do when he heard the pig squeal?

**Student:** *He got his gun and went outside.*

**Instructor:** How many times did the gun go off?

**Student:** *It went off twice.*

**Instructor:** What did Pa see when he went outside?

**Student:** *He saw a black bear standing beside the pigpen.*

**Instructor:** What was the bear trying to do?

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**Student:** *It was trying to grab the pig.*

**Instructor:** When Pa shot at the bear, he missed because he was in a hurry. What is the other reason that he missed the bear?

**Student:** *The light was dim.*

Ask, “What is one thing you remember about the passage?” Write the student’s answer down on first-grade lined paper as he watches.

### **WEEKS 2–3**

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Follow the same weekly pattern as above:

**DAY ONE:** Copywork

**DAY TWO:** Narration Exercise

**DAY THREE:** Copywork

**DAY FOUR:** Narration Exercise

Choose sentences of five to eight words and narrations of around two paragraphs from the student’s history, science, and literature books.

Over these two weeks, look for copywork sentences that contain the first names of particular people. Explain to the student that these are called “proper names” and should begin with a capital letter. Make sure that the student copies the proper names correctly. If the student randomly capitalizes other words, remind her to capitalize only the proper names as well as the first word in the sentence.

## Year Four, Weeks 20–27

Narration exercises will lengthen slightly to ten to twelve paragraphs. After reading the passage independently, the student will continue to answer a directed narration question with three or four sentences, and will write down the first two sentences of this narration for herself.

Dictation exercises will lengthen slightly to 25- 30-word paragraphs, repeated three times. You will also repeat the final sentence in these long dictations an additional time, if necessary.

The pattern of Week 20 will be followed in Weeks 21 through 27.

### WEEK 20

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**DAY ONE:** Narration and Dictation

Allow the student to read the following story independently.

#### ● **begin reading**

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#### “YOUNG BENJAMIN FRANKLIN”

*Nathaniel Hawthorne was a nineteenth-century novelist who also wrote occasional stories for children.*

When Benjamin Franklin was a boy he was very fond of fishing; and many of his leisure hours were spent on the margin of the mill pond catching flounders, perch, and eels that came up thither with the tide.

The place where Ben and his playmates did most of their fishing was a marshy spot on the outskirts of Boston. On the edge of the water there was a deep bed of clay, in which the boys were forced to stand while they caught their fish.

“This is very uncomfortable,” said Ben Franklin one day to his comrades, while they were standing in the quagmire.

“So it is,” said the other boys. “What a pity we have no better place to stand on!”

On the dry land, not far from the quagmire, there were at that time a great many large stones that had been brought there to be used in building the foundation of a new house. Ben mounted upon the highest of these stones.

“Boys,” said he, “I have thought of a plan. You know what a plague it is to have to stand in the quagmire yonder. See, I am bedaubed to the knees, and you are all in the same plight.

“Now I propose that we build a wharf. You see these stones? The workmen mean to use them for building a house here. My plan is to take these same stones, carry them to the edge of the water, and build a wharf with them. What say you, lads? Shall we build the wharf?”

“Yes, yes,” cried the boys; “let’s set about it!”

It was agreed that they should all be on the spot that evening, and begin their grand public enterprise by moonlight.

Accordingly, at the appointed time, the boys met and eagerly began to remove the stones. They worked like a

colony of ants, sometimes two or three of them taking hold of one stone; and at last they had carried them all away, and built their little wharf.

“Now, boys,” cried Ben, when the job was done, “let’s give three cheers, and go home to bed. To-morrow we may catch fish at our ease.”

“Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!” shouted his comrades, and all scampered off home and to bed, to dream of to-morrow’s sport.

In the morning the masons came to begin their work. But what was their surprise to find the stones all gone! The master mason, looking carefully on the ground, saw the tracks of many little feet, some with shoes and some barefoot. Following these to the water side, he soon found what had become of the missing building stones.

“Ah! I see what the mischief is,” said he; “those little rascals who were here yesterday have stolen the stones to build a wharf with. And I must say that they understand their business well.”

He was so angry that he at once went to make a complaint before the magistrate; and his Honor wrote an order to “take the bodies of Benjamin Franklin, and other evil-disposed persons,” who had stolen a heap of stones.

If the owner of the stolen property had not been more merciful than the master mason, it might have gone hard

with our friend Benjamin and his comrades. But, luckily for them, the gentleman had a respect for Ben's father, and, moreover, was pleased with the spirit of the whole affair. He therefore let the culprits off easily.

But the poor boys had to go through another trial, and receive sentence, and suffer punishment, too, from their own fathers. Many a rod was worn to the stump on that unlucky night. As for Ben, he was less afraid of a whipping than of his father's reproof. And, indeed, his father was very much disturbed.

"Benjamin, come hither," began Mr. Franklin in his usual stern and weighty tone. The boy approached and stood before his father's chair. "Benjamin," said his father, "what could induce you to take property which did not belong to you?"

"Why, father," replied Ben, hanging his head at first, but then lifting his eyes to Mr. Franklin's face, "if it had been merely for my own benefit, I never should have dreamed of it. But I knew that the wharf would be a public convenience. If the owner of the stones should build a house with them, nobody would enjoy any advantage but himself. Now, I made use of them in a way that was for the advantage of many persons."

"My son," said Mr. Franklin solemnly, "so far as it was in your power, you have done a greater harm to the

public than to the owner of the stones. I do verily believe, Benjamin, that almost all the public and private misery of mankind arises from a neglect of this great truth—that evil can produce only evil, that good ends must be wrought out by good means.”

To the end of his life, Ben Franklin never forgot this conversation with his father; and we have reason to suppose, that, in most of his public and private career, he sought to act upon the principles which that good and wise man then taught him.

—From *The Fourth McGuffey Reader*  
ed. by William H McGuffey

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**stop reading** —■

You will now ask the student to summarize the passage in three or four sentences. To guide her towards a succinct summary, say, “Tell me about Benjamin Franklin’s attempt to build a wharf.” Her answer should resemble one of the following:

“Benjamin Franklin and his friends wanted to build a wharf. They used a nearby pile of stones that belonged to someone else. When their parents found out they had stolen the stones, they all got into trouble. Franklin said that stealing the stones was all right, because the wharf could be used by everyone, but his father told him that it was still wrong.”

“Benjamin Franklin and his friends were tired of standing in the mud to fish. They used a nearby pile of stones to build a wharf. But the owner of the stones complained to their parents, and they were all punished. Franklin learned that stealing was evil, even if it was done for the advantage of others.”

“Benjamin Franklin and his friends used someone else’s stones to build a wharf. They almost got arrested, and their parents punished them. Benjamin Franklin said that it was all right to take the stones, because the wharf could be used by everyone, and the owner of the stones was going to use them only for himself. But his father told him that he should never do evil in order to bring about something good.”

If the student has trouble choosing important details, ask these three questions:

What did Franklin and his friends do?

Why did this get them into trouble?

What was Franklin’s excuse and his father’s response?

Write the narration down, but do not allow the student to watch. Then ask her whether she can repeat the first two sentences of the narration to herself. If not, read her the first two sentences. Tell her to listen carefully, since you will only read it once. Encourage her to repeat it to herself until she can remember it, and then to say it out loud to herself as she writes it down.

#### **DAY TWO:** Dictation

Tell the student that Hawthorne’s story is based on a single paragraph in Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, which he wrote himself and finished in 1771. Read this entire paragraph as the student listens. You will probably want to tell the student that “emmet” is an old word for “ant”:

There was a salt-marsh that bounded part of the mill-pond, on the edge of which, at high water, we used to stand to fish for minnows. By much trampling, we had made it a mere quagmire. My proposal was to build a wharf there fit for us to stand upon, and I showed my comrades a large heap of stones, which were intended for a new house near the marsh, and which would very well suit our purpose. Accordingly, in the evening, when the workmen were gone, I assembled a number of my play-fellows, and working with them diligently like so many emmets, sometimes two or three to a stone, we brought

them all away and built our little wharf. The next morning the workmen were surprised at missing the stones, which were found in our wharf. Inquiry was made after the removers; we were discovered and complained of; several of us were corrected by our fathers; and though I pleaded the usefulness of the work, mine convinced me that nothing was useful which was not honest.

—From *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*  
by Benjamin Franklin

You may want to discuss with the student how much of Hawthorne's version was simply made up out of his own head so that it would be more interesting!

When you are finished, tell the student that you will be challenging her with a longer dictation than usual. Remind her that this is a paragraph (all of the sentences center around the topic of the wharf in the marsh) and that the first line should be indented.

Tell the student that you will read the selection three times. You will then ask her to write as much of it as she can remember. If she gets stuck, you will read the passage again from the point where her memory failed—but you'll only do this once!

Before you read, tell the student to write the following words on another piece of paper. Each word is hyphenated: *salt-marsh*, *mill-pond*.

Be sure to pause at each comma, and to make a longer pause at the periods.

There was a salt-marsh that bounded part of the mill-pond, on the edge of which, at high water, we used to stand to fish for minnows. By much trampling, we had made it a mere quagmire. My proposal was to build a wharf there fit for us to stand upon, and I showed my comrades a large heap of stones, which were intended for a new house near the marsh, and which would very well suit our purpose.

**DAY THREE:** Narration and Dictation

Allow the student to read the following story independently.

● **begin reading**

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**“THE WHISTLE”**

*James Baldwin was a teacher who lived 1841–1925. He wrote many books for his young students. This tale is from one of those books. It is an interesting story—but Baldwin probably invented it, since it isn't in Benjamin Franklin's autobiography at all!*

Two hundred years ago there lived in Boston a little boy whose name was Benjamin Franklin.

On the day that he was seven years old, his mother gave him a few pennies. He looked at the bright, yellow pieces and said, “What shall I do with these coppers, mother?” It was the first money that he had ever had.

“You may buy something, if you wish,” said his mother.

“And then will you give me more?” he asked.

His mother shook her head and said: “No, Benjamin. I cannot give you any more. So you must be careful not to spend these foolishly.”

The little fellow ran into the street. He heard the pennies jingle in his pocket. How rich he was!

Boston is now a great city, but at that time it was only a little town. There were not many stores.

As Benjamin ran down the street, he wondered what he should buy. Should he buy candy? He hardly knew how it tasted. Should he buy a pretty toy? If he had been the only child in the family, things might have been different. But there were fourteen boys and girls older than he, and two little sisters who were younger.

What a big family it was! And the father was a poor man. No wonder the lad had never owned a toy.

He had not gone far when he met a larger boy, who was blowing a whistle.

“I wish I had that whistle,” he said.

The big boy looked at him and blew it again. Oh, what a pretty sound it made!

“I have some pennies,” said Benjamin. He held them in his hand, and showed them to the boy. “You may have them, if you will give me the whistle.”

“All of them?”

“Yes, all of them.”

“Well, it’s a bargain,” said the boy; and he gave the whistle to Benjamin, and took the pennies.

Little Benjamin Franklin was very happy; for he was only seven years old. He ran home as fast as he could, blowing the whistle as he ran.

“See, mother,” he said, “I have bought a whistle.”

“How much did you pay for it?”

“All the pennies you gave me.”

“Oh, Benjamin!”

One of his brothers asked to see the whistle.

“Well, well!” he said. “You’ve paid a dear price for this thing. It’s only a penny whistle, and a poor one at that.”

“You might have bought half a dozen such whistles with the money I gave you,” said his mother.

The little boy saw what a mistake he had made. The whistle did not please him any more. He threw it upon the floor and began to cry.

“Never mind, my child,” said his mother, very kindly. “You are only a very little boy, and you will learn a great deal as you grow bigger. The lesson you have learned today is never to pay too dear for a whistle.”

Benjamin Franklin lived to be a very old man, but he never forgot that lesson.

Every boy and girl should remember the name of Benjamin Franklin. He was a great thinker and a great doer, and with Washington he helped to make our country free. His life was such that no man could ever say, “Ben Franklin has wronged me.”

“The Whistle” From *Fifty Famous People*,  
by James Baldwin

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**stop reading** —■

You will now ask the student, “Can you tell me about Benjamin Franklin and the penny whistle in three sentences?” The student’s narration should resemble one of the following (and there should be no reason for the student to need a fourth sentence):

“When Benjamin Franklin was little, his mother gave him some pennies. He met a boy with a whistle, and gave the boy all of his pennies for it. When he went home, he discovered that the whistle was only worth one penny.”

“Benjamin Franklin’s mother gave him a handful of pennies. He set off to buy a toy. When he saw a boy playing a whistle, he bought it with all of his money—even though it was only worth one penny.”

“When he was seven years old, Benjamin Franklin got a few pennies from his mother. He knew that he could buy something exciting with it—like candy or a toy. But then he saw a boy playing a penny whistle, and he wanted it so much that he spent all of his money for it.”

If the student has trouble choosing important details, ask these three questions:

What did Franklin get from his mother?

What did he buy?

Why was this a problem?

Write the narration down, but do not allow the student to watch. Then ask her whether she can repeat the first two sentences of the narration to herself. If not, read her the first two sentences. Tell her to listen carefully, since you will only read it once. Encourage her to repeat it to herself until she can remember it, and then to say it out loud to herself as she writes it down.

#### **DAY FOUR:** Dictation

Tell the student that the following passage from Franklin’s autobiography is the only information *he* gives us about his childhood spending habits. Before you give the student her dictation assignment, read this entire selection

aloud. You may wish to tell the student that a book of “polemic divinity” is a book that argues for a particular theological belief.

From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with the *Pilgrim's Progress*, my first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes. I afterward sold them to enable me to buy R. Burton's Historical Collections; they were small chapmen's books, and cheap, 40 or 50 in all. My father's little library consisted chiefly of books in polemic divinity, most of which I read....Plutarch's Lives there was in which I read abundantly, and I still think that time spent to great advantage. There was also a book of [Daniel] Defoe's, called an *Essay on Projects*, and another of Dr. Mather's, called *Essays to do Good*, which perhaps gave me a turn of thinking that had an influence on some of the principal future events of my life. This bookish inclination at length determined my father to make me a printer....

—From *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*  
by Benjamin Franklin

Now prepare the student to take the following sentences from dictation. Remind her that this is a paragraph and that the first line should be indented.

Tell the student that you will read the selection three times, but you won't read it a fourth time—it's shorter than the last dictation exercise.

Before you dictate, remind the student that *Pilgrim's Progress* is the title of a book, and so should be underlined.

Be sure to pause at each comma, and to make a longer pause at the periods.

From a child I was fond of reading, and all the little money that came into my hands was ever laid out in books. Pleased with the Pilgrim's Progress, my first collection was of John Bunyan's works in separate little volumes.